CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

NOW A MAJOR FILM FROM EMI

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

ARABIAN ADVENTURE

This novelisation by
KEITH MILES
Based on an original screenplay by
BRIAN HAYLES

MIRROR BOOKS

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Chapter One

High above the baking sand of the Arabian desert two buzzards circled lazily in a cloudless sky. Their sharp eyes never left for a moment the tiny speck that was moving across the shimmering emptiness below them. It might have been an insect picking its way slowly and painfully over the scorched surface, cruelly exposed to the heat of the midday sun. Instinct told the birds that a victim was at hand. They swooped down to take a closer look at their quarry and they were pleased with what they saw. A small, ragged Arab boy was plodding on across the great waste. He was weakened to the point of exhaustion, and the buzzards knew that it was only a question of biding their time.

Majeed, too, was thinking about the next meal. It seemed an age since the boy had last eaten or drunk a thing and he had begun to wonder if he would ever enjoy food and water again. The desert was a hostile place and Majeed had felt the full weight of its hostility. Each step that his blistered feet took was slower than the last, and the heat was playing tricks with his eyes. Yet he trudged bravely on, holding a cloth bag protectively under his arm, hoping against hope that he would somehow survive the torment of his journey.

When the buzzards flew down ever lower and cast their shadows on the sand around him, Majeed did not have the strength to lift his head upwards. He simply clutched the cloth bag more tightly, offered up a silent prayer and struggled on. His throat was parched now, the pangs of hunger were more insistent and his legs did not really want to do what they were told. Without warning, he found himself stumbling and falling forwards. He was near his last gasp and the birds sensed this at once.

Then the miracle happened.

As he dragged himself up, Majeed saw something

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

that lifted his spirits and gave him fresh impetus to go on. Ahead of him was a tumble of rocks which appeared to mark the edge of the desert plateau. The huge, jagged stones held the promise of cool shadows where he could escape from the glare of the sun, and he lurched at speed towards them. Above his head the buzzards flapped their annoyance.

With a last effort Majeed reached the cover of the rocks and flung himself down, quite out of breath. His eyes suddenly widened with delight and a grin of astonishment stole across his young face. There before him, falling away from the rim of the plateau, was a river valley. Set within its steep, craggy walls was the elegant little city of Jadur.

Was it real, or was it a mirage? Majeed rubbed his eyes then looked again more intently. Jadur was real enough and he spent some minutes trying to take in the wonder of it all. The boy had seen many cities in the course of his travels but never one like this. Dominating Jadur from its highest point was a magnificent palace that backed on to, and seemed to grow from, the sheer cliff that formed the valley's end. Its rooftops and minarets were glinting in the sun; it looked like some dazzling jewel set in base metal. The effect was magical and yet at the same time menacing. The palace was at once part of the city and part of the great mountain that loomed over the valley of Jadur.

Laughing with delight, Majeed opened the cloth bag and took something out of it.

'Look, Shakti!'

The Capuchin monkey that was his friend and constant companion blinked in the daylight and then stared down into the valley.

'People, Shakti – food and water! We are saved!'

Shakti did not need to be told twice. He chattered excitedly and leapt up on to Majeed's shoulder so that he could get a better view. Both boy and monkey shrugged off their fatigue with ease. Finding a narrow path that led down into the valley, Majeed almost

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

skipped along it and Shakti had to cling on to the boy's turban for safety.

Robbed of their prey, the buzzards wheeled in the air and flew out across the desert. It would not be the only time that Majeed and Shakti were snatched back from the jaws of Death.

A high wall surrounded the city of Jadur and gave it a somewhat forbidding aspect. Armed guards patrolled the battlements and there were clusters of soldiers near the massive city gates. Jadur was a place that had a sense of unease about it, as if it lived in the shadow of some terrible threat. The citizens hurried about their business, but many of them seemed to be glancing over their shoulders all the time, fearing some check or rebuke.

Majeed noticed none of this as he strolled in through the city gates. Jadur was a paradise to him because it had rescued him and his best friend from the desert. He found himself in the middle of a bustling confusion of merchants, travellers, street vendors, beggars, camels and donkeys. The atmosphere was lively, the noise deafening and the smell pungent. Majeed immediately felt at home as he was pushed and jostled by the crowd.

'This is better than any desert, Shakti.'

The monkey tapped its agreement on his shoulder.

They wended their way along the busy street until it opened out into a market place. Under the striped awnings of the bazaar trade was brisk as shopkeepers gibbered and haggled. Majeed looked around desperately for signs of water. It was his monkey who first noticed the tumblers.

'What is it, Shakti?'

The animal had performed a somersault on his shoulder.

'Oh. I see now.'

A troupe of acrobats was entertaining a small audience with its repertoire. The men did somersaults, cartwheels and various balancing tricks, but always in

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

a slightly comic way, seeking to draw laughter as well as applause. Majeed was vastly amused by their antics and Shakti took a close interest in the proceedings. The Mauve Gang were highly skilled acrobats and a popular sight in the market place. What the onlookers did not see was that behind their comic routines these men were shrewd-eyed and purposeful. They were not there merely to divert the crowd.

'And now . . .'

It was Achmed, leader of the Mauve Gang and acrobat supreme.

'. . . a human pyramid.'

The tumblers moved swiftly into position and earned gasps of approval from those watching. Majeed's concentration was broken by the arrival of a water-carrier, who was plying his trade with a fearsome yell.

'Water! Water!'

When Majeed turned back to the acrobats, the human pyramid was completed by Achmed, who became its apex. Instead of gazing down at his audience, Achmed used his vantage point to look out across the market place. His eye was sly and searching, and it quickly found something of interest. Through a tangle of awnings and people Achmed could see into a corner of the carpet shop on the far side of the bazaar. The owner was talking to a customer in a conspiratorial manner. There was a glint of metal as the customer took out a sword from beneath his gown. He slipped it to the owner, who hid it at once and then glanced around furtively.

Having seen enough, Achmed somersaulted to the ground and accepted the applause with a hard smile. His colleagues moved along the onlookers, trying to turn applause into money. Achmed went to one particular person in the crowd and whispered something in his ear. The man, Khasim by name, nodded gratefully, pressed some coins into his hand, then glared across at the carpet shop.

With the entertainment now over, Majeed turned

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

his full attention to the water-carrier. The boy had no money at all and so he was forced to beg.

'Water, master . . . I'm dying!'

The water-carrier had to deal with beggars every day.

'Death is free. Water costs money,' he said.

He was about to move on but Majeed threw himself to the ground.

'Have pity, master! Have pity!'

At that moment Khasim shouldered his way roughly through the milling crowd. He was a greasy, unpleasant character of medium height, running to fat and equipped with a drooping moustache and a pair of mobile black eyebrows. These were raised in curiosity when he saw Majeed crouched down in front of the water-carrier. Khasim understood the situation at a glance and he decided to get some sport out of it.

'Water!' he ordered, with a grand gesture.

The water-carrier tipped up his gourd and poured a generous measure into a cup. Khasim beamed greasily at the boy.

'Charity is the key to paradise,' he observed.

'You are the kindest of men, master,' cried Majeed.

'That is what you think, cockroach,' laughed Khasim, taking and paying for the cup of water. 'Here, drink . . .'

As Majeed reached out to take the cup he found it jerked away from him and tilted up so that its precious contents dribbled on to the ground. With a frantic leap, Majeed tried to catch some of the water as it fell, but Khasim made sure that it was always out of reach. The boy's desperation made him roar with laughter and the Mauve Gang joined in the mockery by prancing around and mimicking Majeed's attempts to grab the water. It was painful to be the butt of such sadistic humour.

Khasim tossed the cup back to the water-carrier and strode off in the direction of the carpet shop. Majeed was still on the ground, angry, bitter, humiliated.

'A thousand thanks, master – for nothing!' he muttered.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'Here. Take this.'

It was the water-carrier, finding some pity for the boy after the way he had been treated. He offered Majeed a full cup and this time it was not jerked away. Majeed thanked him with large, grateful eyes, then he shared the drink with Shakti. It revived them both and gave them a kinder view of their welcome in the city of Jadur.

The approach of sunset caused a flurry of activity in the great palace that towered above the city. Soldiers came running into the courtyard and lined up at the ready. They were the men of the Curfew Guard, and they knew better than to be late for their inspection by their commander. Some made last-minute checks on their weapons while others attended to their general smartness. All stood stiffly to attention as Bahloul, the feared guard commander, marched briskly into the courtyard.

Bahloul was a tall, imposing, brutal man who believed in maintaining the most rigid discipline. Like his soldiers, he was dressed in black robes, his face half-hidden by a fold of black cloth. He wore high boots with curling toecaps, a leather jerkin studded with metal and a gleaming, spiked helmet. A vicious-looking sword had been thrust into his thick belt, and it was a weapon which he enjoyed using.

He surveyed the guards before him with a cold and merciless eye, almost hoping for some sign of fault so that he could make an example of one of them.

'So . . .' he hissed, strutting up and down the ranks.

Each man stared straight ahead and hoped that he would not arouse his commander's displeasure. Everyone knew what happened to people who did that.

'Hold it straight!' snapped Bahloul.

The guard to whom he had spoken adjusted his long pike so that it was vertical and in line with all the others. Bahloul looked up at the sharpened heads of the pikes with their golden tassles. He seemed satisfied and nodded to his men.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'Wait here!'

Nobody dared to move an inch as he turned on his heel and headed towards the flight of steps behind him.

Bahloul entered the palace with an air of authority and strode down a long, ornate hallway. His footsteps echoed loudly around the marble interior and his reflection could be seen clearly in the opaque surfaces of the floor and walls. Light was starting to fade in the corridor and torches had already been ignited and placed in their holders.

Turning into a large, domed lobby, Bahloul began to ascend a beautifully carved marble staircase. This whole area of the palace gave an impression of both starkness and opulence, of the blackest evil amid the brightest colour. At the top of the stairs were two enormous doors, guarded by a pair of giant Nubian slaves. Mute and obedient, these men opened the doors when they saw Bahloul coming, and they bowed as he went past them.

Exotic music was playing as the guard commander walked into the throne room. He stood respectfully while the doors closed soundlessly behind him. The room was vast and luxurious, filled with rich hangings, ornate to the point of vulgarity. An Eastern dancer, clad in a flimsy, gossamer-thin dress, was performing a sensuous classical dance. Her delicate hands, with their long, painted fingernails, moved invitingly and Bahloul, though anxious to get about his business, was happy to stay and watch.

The music ended. The dancer stopped and someone clapped at the far end of the room. Bahloul waited patiently, trying to catch the attention of this person as the man lounged on a bed of cushions in the company of three or four harem girls. Giant Nubian slaves, akin to those outside the door, flanked the man, ready to do his bidding in an instant with their razor-sharp scimitars.

The man clicked his fingers in a peremptory fashion and the servants and harem girls hurried out. Bahloul

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

awaited a signal and then he marched forward to kneel before the man. He looked up into a face that was the personification of Evil, a calm, sardonic face, full of a brooding savagery. It was the face of his lord and master, Alquazar, Caliph Supreme.

Bahloul saluted and met the stern gaze of his master.

'The Curfew Patrol is ready, lord,' he said.

Alquazar nodded and a wave brought Bahloul to his feet again. The caliph was dressed in a coal-black cloak that was a symbol of the tyranny by which the kingdom was ruled. His pale, claw-like hands were a mass of jewelled rings. His mouth was hard and twisted. Alquazar had a commanding presence that could make the strongest man tremble.

'Master, master . . .'

Khasim was far from being the strongest man and he trembled all the time he was near Alquazar.

'Master, master . . .'

The informer had scurried into the throne room through a secret door behind one of the arches. Quivering like an aspen leaf, he hurled himself down before the mighty ruler, squirming and grovelling. When he started to speak, unbidden, Bahloul set his foot on Khasim's fat neck and pressed it to the ground.

'Wait until you are asked, scum!' he warned.

Bahloul looked to Alquazar for orders, his hand upon the hilt of his sword. Nothing would have pleased the guard commander more than the chance to cut Khasim's head from his shoulders. The bulging eyes of the informer were fixed on Alquazar, imploring mercy. The latter gave a dark, twisted smile.

'Bahloul, you are my iron fist,' he noted, 'but Khasim acts as my eyes and ears in the city of Jadur. Let the toad speak.'

The guard commander lifted his foot away and Khasim rubbed his neck vigorously and breathed a sigh of relief. Alquazar leaned over and glared down at him.

'Well?'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Khasim was trembling all over again, his manner at its most oily.

'Lord Alquazar, Caliph of Jadur, King of all Men, Master of the Earth, Ruler of the—'

'News – not flattery!' snarled Alquazar, in a blaze of anger. 'Do you have information?'

'Yes, yes,' promised Khasim, urgent and obsequious.

'And what is it?' demanded the other.

'Emperor of the Universe – we know the ringleaders who plot against you . . .'

Khasim cringed for a moment, not sure how his master would take the news. The informer felt that he had brought valuable information but Alquazar did not seem at all impressed by it. Rising to his feet, the caliph spoke in a tone of lofty arrogance.

'The carpet seller and the brass worker have made their plans and stored their weapons.' He came and stood right over the quaking Khasim. 'When darkness falls, they will ambush the Curfew Patrol and attack my palace.' A cold sneer bisected his features. 'But they will fail.'

Khasim was now wriggling on the floor in sheer humiliation. His news was fresh and yet his master already knew it. How had Alquazar found out?

'You are not my only source of information, Khasim,' asserted the caliph. 'I have . . . other means.'

The news of the planned revolt provoked an immediate and typical response from Bahloul.

'Let *me* deal with them, master,' he asked.

Alquazar pondered, a finger to his thin lips. He shook his head.

'Not yet, Bahloul.' He became more decisive. 'They need to learn the true power of Alquazar.'

Trying to ingratiate himself, Khasim knelt at the caliph's feet in supplication. His voice was more oily than ever.

'And how, Lord Alquazar, may I serve you?'

Bahloul looked down at the wretch with contempt but Alquazar had work for the informer to do.

'Go back to the city, Khasim,' he ordered. 'When

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

they have tasted my justice . . . tell me what the people think then.'

Delighted to be of use once more, Khasim scrambled to his feet and went out backwards, bowing ever step of the way. Though he loathed the man himself, Alquazar knew the value of a spy in the market place. When Khasim had gone, he turned back to his guard commander.

'Now, Bahloul. It is time that we taught them a lesson. This is what we will do . . .'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Chapter Two

'It must be tonight!' urged Mahmoud, thumping the table with his clenched fist for emphasis. 'It must be tonight!'

'Everything is ready,' reminded Abu the carpet seller, glancing around his shop. 'Swords, knives, rope . . .'

'It's madness!' protested Asaf, old and comically nervous.

The fire of youth burned up in Mahmoud's face. He was by far the youngest of the rebels and he was eager for positive action.

'Asaf may be afraid but I am not!' he declared.

'Keep your voice down,' counselled Abu.

'It's madness,' repeated the old man, shaking his head. 'There are not enough of us. We'll never defeat the Curfew Guard.'

'We must and we will,' assured Abu, quietly confident.

'Yes, it's our freedom we're fighting for!' Mahmoud's cheeks were aflame with excitement now. 'And we'll die for it – if needs be!'

The men had gathered in the carpet shop to finalise details for the surprise attack on the soldiers. Abu, the acknowledged leader of the rebels, was a calm, controlled, gently decisive person who had been a long-standing opponent of the harsh regime of the Caliph Alquazar. Immediate support came from the committed young revolutionary, Mahmoud. He was brave and determined, ready to risk life and limb in an attempt to free his people from the yoke of tyranny. Only Asaf, cautious, ancient and worried, had reservations.

'Do you want Jadur to remain a city in bondage?' asked Abu.

'No, no, of course not,' mumbled Asaf.

'Then fight with us,' hissed Mahmoud. 'Tonight!'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

The old man scratched his beard and considered the wisdom of it all.

'We must strike now, Asaf,' whispered the carpet seller.

'Before it is too late,' added Mahmoud. 'This way – with surprise on our side – we will win.'

'Surprise?' Asaf gave a shrug of defeat. 'We could never surprise Alquazar. He knows everything.'

'He will soon know about us,' affirmed Mahmoud.

'We can delay it no longer,' explained Abu.

The carpet shop was the storehouse for the weapons to be used in the revolt. Knives and swords had been brought there and hidden for some weeks now. Abu knew that his death would be a matter of course if his shop was ever searched by soldiers. He did not want those weapons to be found before he and his men had had a chance to use them in defence of their rights.

'Are you with us, Asaf?' he inquired, softly.

'We do not want cowards,' taunted Mahmoud.

'I am with you!' said the old man with pride. 'It's madness, maybe, but I am with you all the way.'

The others exchanged a look of satisfaction, then moved to the entrance of the shop. The sun had almost set now and long shadows had fallen across the bazaar, the longest and darkest being that cast by the palace of Alquazar. Abu put his head out into the street and glanced around. He signalled to Asaf, who was the first to leave.

'Warn the others,' he ordered, as the old man left.

'When the curfew sounds, we will be ready,' promised Mahmoud, then he, too, slipped out of the shop and mingled with the crowd.

While the rebels had been making their plans, Alquazar had been working out his counter-measures. Bahloul had listened with great care to every word and he now gave a grim chuckle of approval.

'That will teach them, master,' he agreed.

'They must be crushed, Bahloul! No man lifts his hand against Alquazar and lives to boast about it.' He

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

was at his most vengeful and sinister now, his voice full of suppressed rage. 'They must be destroyed. Completely.'

'They will be.'

The guard commander did not have the slightest doubt about it. Alquazar went over his plan once more so that he could savour it afresh. He reached the key point.

'You will hold your men back until I give the word . . .'

'And then . . .'

The discussion came to an abrupt end as the heavy doors swung open and a striking young girl came tripping in on her toes. It was Zuleira, the lovely step-daughter of Alquazar, moving with her usual grace across the polished marble floor.

'Step-father . . .' she called.

'Ah, Zuleira.' His manner was cold but not unwelcoming.

Zuleira was barely eighteen and had an innocence that was quite enchanting. Her veil did nothing to hide her ravishing beauty and her charm was evident whenever she spoke. As the girl ran up to her step-father, Bahloul watched her with more than a passing interest.

'You have been hiding from me,' she accused Alquazar in a tone of mock-scolding.

'I have been busy, Zuleira,' he replied.

'You shan't escape me,' she laughed, flinging her arms around his neck. 'You're my prisoner now . . .'

Bahloul found himself wishing that she had put her arms around his neck like that. He would certainly not have detached himself from her in the way that Alquazar was now doing.

'I have . . . work to do,' announced the caliph.

There was an offhand coldness in his voice that did not deter Zuleira. She clearly saw none of the evil that was the essence of the man. To her he was just a rather grumpy step-father who had little time to spend with her.

'I am lonely,' she complained.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'You have women who attend you, Zuleira,' he rejoined.

'It's not the same. I want to be with you.'

'I am sorry,' he sighed. 'My work must come first.'

'Numbers, books, stars, spells . . . they are always taking you away from me. Always.'

Alquazar made no reply and she tried to put her arms around him again. He pushed her away, gently but firmly.

'I am so bored, step-father,' she moaned. 'All I ask is an hour of your company. You can spare that.'

'Not now, child. It's not possible.'

'Please . . .'

Her entreaty fell on deaf ears. Alquazar was quite unmoved and had no intention of spending time with Zuleira when he might be at his work. Inwardly, Bahloul wished that the girl was seeking his company. He would spare her much more than an hour.

'There – that's the trouble,' she continued, pointing towards a low door in the back wall of the room. 'You seem to live in that study. And why – *why*?'

She crossed nimbly to the door and tried to push it open but it was firmly locked. It was a strange, diamond-shaped door, made of bronze and covered with curious markings that were quite out of keeping with the decoration in the rest of the room. Since it had no handle, she put her shoulder to it.

'Come away from there, Zuleira!'

'Why do you lock yourself away so much, step-father? I want to be with you.' She ran back to him. 'I could help you in there – if you would let me.'

All trace of kindness left Alquazar's voice and the words came out like escaping steam.

'You are never to go into that room – do you understand? *Never!* It holds secrets and experiments that you can never know about. Disturb them and you would be in grave danger.'

Zuleira was utterly subdued by his sternness. A hint of softness, concern almost, returned to his voice.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'You would be in such danger . . . that even I could not save you.'

She shuddered at this but found strength to reply.

'I'd do no harm in there.'

'Enough! Trust and obey me!'

A momentary defiance flashed in her eyes but it soon faded.

'Yes, step-father.'

Once again she had to suffer the indignity of being treated like a small child who was too young and silly to be told the truth.

'Go now, Zuleira.'

She was about to ask what precisely was behind the strange door but she saw that her questioning would be in vain.

'Bahloul will escort you,' decided her step-father.

'Oh, very well,' she consented.

After one last, sad glance back, she went out, with the guard commander at her shoulder. They swept into the lobby and descended the staircase, leaving the giant Nubian slaves on guard outside the now closed doors of the throne room.

At the foot of the stairs Zuleira paused for an instant and her companion seized his chance. With a smile that was at once sly and suggestive, he put his mouth close to her ear.

'A princess need never be lonely . . . even in Jadur . . .'

By way of reply, she gave him a look of total disdain and stalked off. Bahloul went after her, his features dark with silent anger.

When he was quite certain that he was alone in the throne room, Alquazar went swiftly to the strange little door. He put the palm of his hand on a given point and whispered. The door swung quietly open, its reverse side being solid rock. A secret tunnel was now revealed and it was one into which only the caliph himself could venture. Hewn out of black rock, the tunnel was dank and uninviting, wreathed in shifting, multi-coloured

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

mist that gave off a peculiar odour. As he stepped into the tunnel, he felt the door close noiselessly behind him.

Alquazar walked a short way until he reached a narrow stone bridge that arched its way through a great, dark cavern which seemed to have no walls to it. Beneath the bridge itself, which lacked any parapet, was an idly bubbling cauldron of steaming lava, which glowed and sizzled. When Alquazar made his way over the bridge with practised ease, the lava began to seethe and bubble quite violently, sending up sheets of flame and searing columns of steam. The caliph of Jadur was in no way alarmed by all this and he looked down into the base of the cavern with calm satisfaction.

Beyond the bridge was a shaft but there seemed to be no steps leading up it. Alquazar was not dismayed. He drew his cloak right around him, remained perfectly still for a few moments, then started to float upwards, as if being lifted by some invisible hand. He went higher and higher, then faster and faster, his cloak billowing around him as he ascended through the eerie shadows.

At the very top of the shaft was another cavern, the room of which he had spoken to his step-daughter, Zuleira. The cavern was in darkness until Alquazar arrived from below, but the moment that he stepped into it, pockets of flame burst out in various alcoves to light his way.

The shaft where he entered the cavern opened between two huge carved stone heads that were ancient and bizarre and richly ornamented. Though the rest of the cavern was plain and undecorated, one whole wall seemed to be made up of countless prisms of crystal that reflected the light from the flames. A series of natural stone levels rose by gradations to a slab of rock that formed a balcony in front of the wall of crystal.

It was towards this balcony that Alquazar stepped with purpose and urgency. He stared up at the glittering, fragmented wall for a moment and then addressed it in a clear, commanding voice.

'Mirror of the Moon – your master speaks. Show me Jadur – and the traitors who scurry there like rats . . .'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

The myriad crystals began to alter their shape and pattern at once. Slowly and imperceptibly, the coloured lights changed by degrees into a view of the streets and market place of the city. Deep in his weird cavern, Alquazar was able to stare up at a wall of crystal and see exactly what he wanted.

In the streets of Jadur there was a desperation that almost amounted to panic. People were in a rush to get under cover before curfew hour and they showed scant respect for one another in their haste. Shopkeepers quarrelled with customers, street vendors bumped into beggars, camels and donkeys added to the confusion by being even more obstinate than usual. Tempers were frayed, words were heated and there were several collisions as goods were bundled away hurriedly and clumsily.

Majeed had no idea what was happening and he found himself shoved in all directions. He was an innocent bystander, caught up in the turmoil that was generated by the impending curfew. Neither he nor Shakti could make anything of the babble of voices from the various stalls in the bazaar.

'Too late – it's sunset!'

'No sale! No sale!'

'Get out of my way, boy!'

'No more trading here!'

'Take your money – this shop is closed!'

After being pushed aside, yelled at, knocked down and tripped over half a dozen times, Majeed began to have second thoughts about the city of Jadur. Had he been saved from the desert for *this*?

Only one of the shopkeepers seemed to remain at all calm. This was Abu the carpet seller, who, taking advantage of the commotion, was using it as a cover for the distribution of arms. Assisted by old Asaf at the doorway of the shop, Abu slipped swords, knives and other weapons to various rebel followers as they went past. The men quickly concealed what they had been given and sought out hiding places from which they

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

might ambush the hated Curfew Guard. Abu was pleased. Everything was going according to plan.

'Move along, boy!' said Asaf, tetchily.

Majeed was not involved in the plan and the last thing the conspirators needed was the presence of a ragged boy crouching in the doorway. Asaf pointed down the street.

'Where can I go?' bleated Majeed, who had fought his way to the comparative safety of the shop doorway. 'Let me stay here.'

'Get yourself home!'

'But I have no home, master.'

'Quickly – before the curfew sounds!'

Yet again Majeed was pushed out into the street and jostled along. Shakti was back in his cloth bag and Majeed did his best to shield the monkey from any knocks. Sheer chaos seemed to reign now and the boy was totally bemused by it.

Mahmoud, the young, hot-blooded rebel, knew exactly what to do. He led a group of men through the streets and indicated vantage points where they could hide. Some climbed up on to the roofs of the shops while others began to set traps with coils of rope. The last of the rebels were collecting their weapons from the carpet shop now and receiving a snapped order.

'Hurry – you must be in position. It'll be nightfall soon.'

The sun, red and tired, was now sinking low over Jadur.

'The tiger is amongst them, Shakti,' commented Majeed, as people broke into a run. 'But why are they afraid?'

Shakti chattered a reply but it was lost in the general hubbub. Majeed was pressed further along the street by the panic-stricken crowd. What was going on?

Mahmoud, exhilarated by the thought of the battle that was to come, clambered up on to a roof after his men and whispered a command.

'Remember, don't attack until they're right in the trap.'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Not far away, on the roof of the carpet shop, Abu settled down with another group of rebels behind the balustrade. They had a bucket of hot pitch at the ready as well as rocks and other primitive missiles. Below them, inside the carpet shop itself, Asaf was crouched nervously in the company of yet more rebels. The men were clutching an odd array of weapons and hardly dared to stir.

'Waiting for freedom . . . makes my knees knock,' confessed Asaf.

'Once the tyranny of Alquazar is swept away we will all sleep easier, old friend,' said one of the others.

They were words of comfort but they did nothing for the ancient knees of old Asaf. He began to murmur to himself something which he had already stated many times.

'It's madness . . . it's madness . . .'

The sun had come to the end of its term for another day and a guard outside the city gates gave a signal. Trumpeters appeared on each of the two towers that flanked the gates. The men blew a high, shrill call at the dying sky, producing a jarring and menacing discord. It was to prove an omen.

Barely had the call sounded than the mighty gates began to swing shut on their sturdy hinges. A gaggle of travellers raced to get inside the city walls before the gates closed tight and they were only just in time. Among the newcomers was a solitary rider, a handsome young man in his early twenties, with a brave, open face and a square set to his shoulders. Though dressed in fairly ordinary apparel, the man had a noble bearing and he handled his mount expertly.

The name of the young man was Hasan and he had come to Jadur with a very special purpose in mind. That purpose was forgotten now as he looked around, puzzled at the fear that was clearing the streets. Hasan tried to stop someone long enough to ask what was happening but it was in vain. Nobody wanted to stay on the streets and Hasan soon found himself alone in the

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

deserted market place. He and his horse looked around in astonishment.

Gazing down upon the scene from inside his cavern, Alquazar fixed his eyes on the rebels lurking on the rooftops. His laugh was scornful and his mind made up. Moving away from the wall of crystal, he strode down a small passageway cut through the rock and out on to a lone crag. Anyone seeing him there, set high above the mountain, would have imagined him to have been part of the craggy formation itself, so completely did he blend with the sharp-edged rocks.

From his position on the mountain that loomed over the valley, Alquazar could see Bahloul and his patrol waiting in the courtyard below, poised to move at a given signal. The caliph did not need his soldiers just yet. First, he had to employ some of his own sorcery against the rebels of Jadur. From beneath his cloak, he took a handful of strange powder and held it out in front of him.

'My loyal subjects,' he began, looking down upon the men who were crouched on rooftops far below him in the streets of the city, 'you are fools and traitors!' His lip curled viciously. 'It is time for you to learn the true might of Alquazar . . .'

He stepped out to the very edge of the crag and brought the magic powder close to his face.

'Let them be dust before the wind,' he whispered.

Then he blew the powder out gently towards the city . . .

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Chapter Three

Crouched in their various hiding places, the rebels of Jadur waited with growing apprehension. Something had gone amiss. The Curfew Patrol should be making its rounds by now. It was always relentlessly punctual – Bahloul saw to that. Surprise, annoyance and alarm began to spread through the ranks of the rebels.

Inside the carpet shop old Asaf was positively quaking.

'Where are they?' he wondered.

'Hurry up, hurry up . . .' muttered a colleague, fingering a dagger.

'They should have marched through by now,' noted Akbar, another of the men. 'What's gone wrong?'

Asaf paced up and down, ringing his hands and fearing the worst.

'I said it was madness . . . I did say . . .'

Everyone in the carpet shop was soon as jumpy as he was. Above them, on the roof, morale was no higher. Disconcerted by the absence of the Patrol, Abu and his men began to lose confidence and bicker amongst themselves. Their ambush had been meticulously planned but they had not bargained for a contingency like this.

'They must know something, Abu,' claimed one of the rebels.

'Keep calm!' suggested their leader, himself now rattled.

'They're not coming!' wailed another voice.

'Give them time,' advised Abu, as sweat broke out on his forehead. 'The Patrol must come soon.'

'Abu – look!'

The carpet seller did not need to have his attention directed up towards the mountain above the city. Every man present found his gaze transfixed. High above

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

them, growing larger and larger, was a great black tornado cloud.

The magic dust which Alquazar had blown so softly into the air had become a terrifying instrument of revenge. After building up its power with awesome speed, the tornado unleashed its full venom on the hapless city of Jadur. The black cloud corkscrewed its way downwards with a shriek that reverberated off all sides of the valley. It hit the market place with the force of an explosion and the results were quite devastating.

Abu and his men were blown from their rooftops like so many straws and the missiles which were intended for the Curfew Patrol rained down upon them. The demonic wind scoured every nook and cranny of the city and no one escaped its fury. Mahmoud and his men were knocked from their rooftop as if by some giant club and they clung desperately to the awning of the shop below. Other rebels were hurled against stone walls until they were senseless or caught beneath collapsing stalls.

Shivering inside the carpet shop, Asaf and his friends felt the full force of the tornado. It ripped right through the shop and sent them sprawling, covered by heavy carpets that were blown down on top of them. Asaf was so frightened he could not even find words to remind them of his earlier warning.

The streets of the city, so still and empty a short while ago, were now alive with whirling objects. Pottery, brassware, wood, fruit, cloth and leather goods were all whisked along with great force, hitting and bruising more than one rebel. As the tornado searched its way around Jadur with mounting hysteria, it seemed as if the whole city would be torn apart.

Hasan, caught in the deserted market place, was buffeted mercilessly. He dismounted from his horse, which bolted, leaving him quite alone to face the anger of the screeching wind. Unable to find any shelter, Hasan was swept along like a dead leaf, his cloak flapping all round him.

Majeed and Shakti were huddled in a shallow ditch,

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

keeping their heads down and wondering if the fearful tornado would ever stop. They had been caught in more than one sandstorm in the desert but they had never met anything as ferocious as this. When the boy looked up from his place of refuge, he saw a scene of chaos and destruction. The babble of voices was scarcely audible in the howling wind but he did hear a number of snatched phrases.

'Save those weapons . . .'

'Impossible . . .'

'Help, Mahmoud! . . . Help me!'

'Madness . . . we are being punished . . . madness . . .'

'Where is Abu?'

'The plan is ruined . . .'

'Help me, someone!'

'The shop . . . blown to pieces . . .'

'All my goods . . .'

'Where is Abu?'

'Help!'

The rebels were now in complete disarray and gripped by panic. Abu, dazed by his fall from the rooftop, lay on the ground and the sight of their prostrate leader broke the nerve of the men. Some fled, some were bowled along, some yelled for mercy, all gave up. Only old Asaf, who had prophesied doom for the rebellion, thought about saving the stricken leader. Crawling out of the carpet shop on his hands and knees, he grabbed hold of Abu and dragged the inert body with the utmost difficulty back into the recesses of the shop.

Hasan, meanwhile, had managed to regain his feet and to untangle his cloak. He clung to the side of a stone building like a limpet, defying the tornado with every ounce of his strength. But he was up against a supernatural force and he was not allowed to resist for long. The howl of the wind suddenly reached a new and more frightening pitch; the force of the tornado was moving and wrecking far more solid objects this time. A thick wooden beam that jutted out above Hasan's head snapped like a twig and fell through the air. It

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

caught the brave young man a glancing blow and he dropped to the ground, unconscious.

Alquazar stood on his lone crag and took a sadistic pleasure in all that was happening. He decided that the rebel plan had been more than scotched by now and he raised his hand in a simple gesture.

'Be still . . . enough . . .'

The wind dropped as swiftly as it had come. In its place was a weird, unnatural silence that hung over Jadur like a pall.

Alquazar looked down into the palace courtyard where Bahloul was still waiting with the Curfew Guard. The tornado which had ripped the city apart had left the palace undisturbed. Bahloul and his men were now keen to be involved in the action.

Stepping back into the mouth of the cavern, Alquazar took something from beneath his cloak and hurled it at the spot he had just left on the crag.

'Now, Bahloul . . .'

Instantly, a huge column of flame burst out upon the crag and the sorcerer disappeared from sight behind it.

Bahloul, seated astride his fine Arab stallion, saw the signal and then swung round to face his men. There was an air of finality in his barked command.

'You know the law of Alquazar! Anyone breaking the curfew is a condemned man! If they resist – kill them!'

Sword in hand, he spurred his horse through the palace gates and led his soldiers down towards the shattered remains of the market place. Bahloul was truly his master's iron fist. Alquazar had broken the spirit of the rebels with his sorcery: Bahloul would now smash any vestige of resistance with the savagery of his raid.

An eerie stillness lay upon the streets as Majeed peeped out from his hiding place. Nothing moved and no sound was to be heard. A trail of wreckage and debris told its own mute tale about the progress of the tornado. With

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Shakti tucked up in his bag, Majeed began to walk through the streets of Jadur, marvelling at each turn at the extent of the devastation. The grim silence was quite unnerving and the shadows were ominous but the boy strolled on.

Shakti popped his head cautiously out of his bag, his large eyes rolling nervously. The monkey brought a hand to his mouth and then pointed ahead.

'What is it now, Shakti?'

The monkey chattered quietly and the boy realised what he was trying to say. Ahead of them, lying beneath a fallen spar of timber and hidden beneath his cloak, was the body of a man. Shakti obviously thought that it was a corpse and he dived back into his bag as Majeed stepped gingerly forward.

'Are you all right?' asked the boy, kneeling beside the figure.

The body remained quite motionless. Majeed shifted the beam out of the way and turned back the man's cloak so that he could study his face. A trickle of blood came from a gash in the man's forehead.

'Are you all right?'

There was the faintest flicker of the man's eyelids.

'He's alive, Shakti! Quick – water!'

Majeed raced off in search of water and he was soon in luck. Hanging from a metal spike in a wall was a waterbag, dribbling its contents away through a small slit. Majeed grabbed the bag and took it back to the man, holding it over his face so that the water trickled on to it.

The man put a tired hand to his head, then he rubbed his eyes and looked up. Helped by Majeed, he sat up a little and took a proper drink of water. His head was still pounding but he was beginning to recall what had happened. He let go of the waterbag.

'Thank you,' he smiled.

'We thought you were dead, master.'

'We?' The man could see no one else.

'Shakti and me.' The monkey's head darted out of the cloth bag. 'This is Shakti.'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

The man acknowledged the monkey with a grin and the animal knew that it had made a friend. Shakti climbed out of his bag and sat on Majeed's turban. The boy completed the introductions.

'And I am Majeed.'

'Hello, Majeed. My name is Hasan.'

While Hasan was still trying to recover from the blow to his skull, Bahloul and the guards were storming through the streets with speed. If they saw the slightest movement in the shadows, they hacked away with their swords or probed murderously with their pikes. They were in no mood to show any mercy.

'That way!'

They obeyed the snarled order from Bahloul at once and turned into a narrow, twisting street. With Bahloul at their heels, they surged along the street, hoping to find some of the rebels still at large. There was no better way to please their commander – and hence their caliph – than by running down an enemy of the state.

'Try that way!'

Again they let Bahloul's finger direct them and this time they had more luck. Two peasants, who had been set to join in the rebellion, were resting in a shop doorway. The sight of the Curfew Guard stirred up their resentment and they ignored the fact that they were unarmed and hopelessly outnumbered. They jumped out of the doorway, grabbed stones from the ground and began to pelt the soldiers.

Bahloul was delighted to have flushed out some of the rebels.

'Take them!'

A skirmish soon developed.

Hasan poured the last of the water over his head to wake himself up completely. Thinking it was a joke, Shakti began to turn a series of mirthful somersaults. Majeed had to calm him down.

Still sitting on the ground, Hasan looked around him.

'What kind of city is this?'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'No place for strangers!' asserted Majeed.

'They closed the gates at sunset,' remembered Hasan. 'There must be some sort of curfew. Why?'

Majeed shrugged. He did not even begin to understand what was going on in the city of Jadur.

'We seem to be the only people on the streets,' observed Hasan.

'We are, master.' The boy felt that he could tell the truth to a friend. 'I am afraid.' The monkey immediately ran to the cloth bag and climbed into it. 'Shakti is afraid, too.'

'You will be safe with me,' said Hasan, with reassuring firmness. He put a comforting arm around the boy's shoulders. 'I will look after you, Majeed. Have no fear.'

There was something in Hasan's tone which gave the boy confidence. He sensed that he was in the presence of no ordinary traveller.

'That wind . . .'

'It scared me to death, master.'

'But where did it come from? Who sent it?'

'Terrible things happen in this place, master. Ask no questions.'

'But I want to know why . . .'

Hasan got no further. Soldiers had suddenly appeared in the market place and were carrying out a thorough search. The ruthless manner in which they went about their task left the friends in no doubt about the kind of reception they might themselves receive at the hands of the Curfew Guard.

'Help me, Majeed . . .'

'Hold on, master.'

Straining for all he was worth, the boy tried to drag the injured Hasan to a place of safety but he was unable to move him. Bahloul now came on the scene and, indicating that a couple of soldiers should accompany him, he urged his horse forward up the street in which Hasan lay. Finding the way obstructed by an overturned table and a range of assorted objects from nearby shops, Bahloul dismounted and handed the reins of his

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

horse to one of his men. He kicked the table aside and proceeded up the street on foot.

Majeed looked anxiously at the approaching soldiers.

'Hide yourself – now!' ordered Hasan.

'I can't leave you, master.'

'You must. Go!'

'But if they find you here . . .'

'Go!'

Summoning up all his strength, Hasan pushed the boy into the shadows around the building. Majeed found a small alcove and backed into it gratefully. He could just make out the figures of Bahloul and his henchmen as they marched up to the wounded Hasan.

'You have broken the law of Alquazar,' accused Bahloul, standing over the young man.

Hasan struggled to get up.

'Captain, my name is—'

Before he could say another word, he was struck down by the hilt of Bahloul's sword. The guard commander did not have time for any conversations with people who did not observe the curfew.

'Bring him!'

The soldiers dragged the body of Hasan through the dust. Like the two peasants before him, Hasan had been beaten to the ground by the power of the iron fist. There were now at least three candidates for the palace dungeons.

Bahloul took a last look around, his feet coming within inches of Majeed's nose. The boy did not move a muscle or make a sound. He gasped with relief when Bahloul finally marched back towards the market place with his soldiers hauling the luckless Hasan behind him.

Jadur had been less than friendly to Majeed. He had been teased by the cruel Khasim, knocked about in the rush provoked by the curfew and blown hither and thither by the tornado. Now, this . . .

He came to a quick decision.

'Shakti – this place is not for us. Once we have earned our bread tomorrow, we move on.'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Alquazar had been pleased by the effect of his sorcery upon the rebels of Jadur. As he had promised, they had been taught a stern lesson and brought to a better appreciation of his vast powers. When he stepped back into his cavern, therefore, he was quite elated, keen to celebrate his achievement. His voice was proud and challenging.

'Now let them answer – am I not the mightiest of them all?'

The reply came from what seemed to be a great distance and it was spoken with a kind of wistful sadness.

'Not yet the mightiest . . .'

'What!' roared Alquazar.

'Not yet the mightiest . . .'

Fury overtook him and he clambered up to the balcony that faced the great wall of crystal.

'Do you dare to argue with *me*! I am your master!'

The pattern of the crystals changed subtly until a face appeared upon it. Alquazar might have been staring into a gigantic mirror, for the face was his. But whereas his own features were taut and pinched, there was kindness and resignation in those before him.

Alquazar had summoned up his double. The man in the mirror was his soul-image and the sorcerer talked to him as if he were living flesh.

'Did you hear me?' snarled Alquazar. 'I am your master.'

The soul-image bowed its head but did so with a quiet insolence that left Alquazar wary and suspicious. He pointed a finger up at the mirror of crystal.

'Do not challenge me!' he warned.

The soul-image spoke with a simple directness.

'I offer no challenge – only the truth.'

'The truth is that I am supreme!' cried Alquazar, striking an imperious pose. His eyes blazed when the head in the mirror was shaken in disagreement. 'I am supreme!' he bellowed.

The soul-image waited until its master had calmed down. It looked exactly like Alquazar himself but it

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

represented all the virtues and fine qualities that he so signally lacked.

'You can never be lord of all until ... .'

'Until . . . until . . . ?' The sorcerer was desperate for the news.

'Until you possess the Rose of Elil . . .'

Concern made Alquazar move a pace closer to the mirror.

'Is the talisman still safe?' There was a pause. 'Answer!'

Again there was a hint of insolence in the bow which the soul-image now made. Its voice was clear and positive.

'It remains untouched, master.'

'Excellent!'

'It is the greatest talisman for good that exists.'

'And soon it will be mine,' laughed Alquazar, already plotting the uses to which he would put the Magic Rose. 'Then I shall be lord of all the world!'

'Whoever holds the Flower of Mercy can destroy you,' reminded the soul-image. 'You can be wiped from the face of the earth.'

'Never!' boasted Alquazar. 'I will seize it for myself. The Rose will be in my charge – where it belongs.'

'It belongs on the side of goodness,' came the reply.

A peal of mocking laughter filled the cavern as Alquazar showed his scorn for the idea of goodness. The soul-image remained silent, forced to serve its master regardless of how unpleasant that duty was. It watched as the sorcerer strutted up and down on the balcony, gloating over the future that lay in store for him.

'In other hands, it can destroy me,' he admitted, 'but in *my* hands, in the hands of Alquazar, it can be made to serve my purpose. It will become the willing slave of the powers of darkness.'

He leaned in closer to the mirror for confirmation.

'Is that not so?'

Reluctantly, the soul-image nodded. But it added one important condition.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'Your evil hand can never pluck the Flower of Mercy. It can only be yours . . . with help.'

'Then it *can* be taken?' Alquazar was overjoyed. 'How?'

The soul-image said nothing but its master read its thoughts.

'What price must I pay?' he asked, shrewdly. 'You want me to strike a bargain, I can see.' Disdain entered his voice. 'Impossible! A master does not bargain with a miserable slave.'

'If you want to know how you may take the Rose of Elil . . .'

There was a persuasive lilt in the voice and Alquazar found himself listening to it. He was ready to do almost anything to capture the priceless talisman.

'Well?'

'Give me my freedom,' pleaded the soul-image. 'Then I will tell you all that you need to know.'

Alquazar considered the proposition for a second then rejected it outright. He intended to keep the upper hand.

'You will be released when I have the Rose. Not before.'

'Give me my freedom *now*,' insisted the other.

'Do you wish to remain in darkness for the rest of time?' growled the sorcerer with menace.

The soul-image had little choice in the matter. It sought an assurance from its master.

'Once the Rose is brought to you . . . will you release me then?'

'You have my word!'

For once Alquazar sounded as if he was going to honour a bond. The soul-image told him what he was dying to know.

'A hand that can bring the Rose of Elil to you is already in Jadur. The man is a stranger to the city. See . . .'

The wall of crystal clouded over and the other face of Alquazar vanished. In its place came a view of the streets that led up to the palace. There, dragged along

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

by members of the Curfew Guard, was the limp body of Hasan. Watching him from the safety of a doorway were a small boy and a monkey.

Alquazar was well pleased. His soldiers were bringing the very man he needed straight to him.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Chapter Four

The dungeons were deep beneath the palace and they were reached by means of stone steps that curved down the side of one of the walls. No natural light penetrated this part of the building and only a few guttering torches disturbed the subterranean gloom. The air was thick and unhealthy and charged with the stink of human misery. Damp, dark cells provided homes for rats and toads as well as for the unfortunates who were consigned to them. Alquazar was justly proud of the reputation which his dungeons enjoyed among the people of Jadur, who feared them as they feared the plague. No man had ever been locked away in them and come out alive.

'Faster!'

Bahloul kicked the still semi-conscious Hasan down the hard steps and went after him.

'Keep moving!' he ordered, prodding the new prisoner with the point of his sword. 'All the way to the bottom.'

He gave Hasan another kick and the latter tumbled down the remainder of the steps into the well of the dungeons. It was a large, low cave and its central area was occupied by a whole range of sinister appliances. Alquazar had supervised the construction of this torture chamber personally and it bore all the hallmarks of his evil and malevolent imagination.

The gaoler met Hasan at the bottom of the steps, hoisted him to his feet and shoved him towards the open door of a cell on the far side of the cave. Hasan passed men who were stretched to breaking-point on the racks or who hung from chains by their thumbs. He saw hollow-eyed creatures subjected to all kinds of dreadful pain and he wondered what crimes could possibly have deserved such punishments.

'In there.'

The gaoler pointed to the door of the cell but Hasan

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

hesitated at the threshold, checked by the stench that came from inside.

'Get in!' yelled Bahloul, helping him on his way with his boot. He came and stood over Hasan as he lay sprawled across the hard rock of the cell floor. 'Make yourself at home.'

Hasan struggled to his feet again and spoke with defiance.

'I am a prince and the son of a prince!'

A blow from Bahloul sent him reeling.

'Release me at once!' he demanded, still with the spirit to get back up again. 'Release me.'

'Do not worry,' sniggered the gaoler. 'We'll let you out at dawn.'

'In time for your execution,' laughed Bahloul.

'Wait – you must listen to me!'

But Hasan's pleas were in vain. He stumbled across the cell, only to find the door slammed in his face. Heavy bolts slid into position outside the door and a rusty key was turned. Departing footsteps told Hasan that he had seen the last of the guard commander for a long while. He tried to budge the door without success and he began to beat on it in his rage and frustration.

Sheer exhaustion made him stop and he leaned against the door for support. There was a rustling noise behind him and it caused him to turn round with surprise. At the far end of the cell, laid out on some loose straw, was an old man in tattered clothes. He seemed very weak and shaky but there was a smile of resignation on his wrinkled face and he spoke without rancour.

'Save your strength, my son,' he counselled.

'I must tell them who I am,' argued Hasan.

'You are wasting your breath.'

'I will not be treated in this way,' insisted the young man. 'Allah helps those who help themselves.'

'Then you are out of luck,' returned the old man, with a dry chuckle. He studied Hasan as carefully as the bad light would allow. 'You're not from these parts . . . are you a merchant?'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Even in those circumstances, the suggestion offended Hasan and his pride made him pull himself up to his full height.

'I am Hasan, son of Abdul-al-Bukir, a prince of noble blood.'

The old man was remarkably unimpressed by the news and clearly did not believe a word of it.

'We don't have many princes in here,' he smiled.

His companion was hurt by the rebuff and he spoke with a blunt sincerity and conviction.

'I am telling the truth – and I came here in good faith . . .'

Beckoning him to step closer, the old man looked at him more shrewdly. He stared deep into Hasan's eyes, as if searching for something there. Whatever it was he seemed to have found it because he grunted his way to his senile feet, mustered all the dignity he could, then made a salaam before the battered young man. He would have knelt before Hasan if the latter had not prevented him and helped him gently back to his straw bed.

'I am Wazir-al-Wuzara,' announced the old man. 'Once I was headman of this city . . . once. I give you greeting.'

'A political prisoner?' asked Hasan. A suspicion crossed his mind. 'Or were you caught taking bribes?'

Fierce indignation brought Wazir up from the straw again.

'There was no crime,' he croaked, 'just as there was no trial. I am here – as you are – by order of the caliph.'

'Your caliph has his own ideas about justice and mercy,' said Hasan, ruefully. 'Has it always been like this?'

'No. Ten years ago Jadur was a city fit for honest men. Now it is filled with hate and ruled by fear.' Sadness overcame him. 'My city is a place of great unhappiness.'

'And yet it holds the most beautiful princess in all Arabia,' noted Hasan. 'So they say . . .'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Wazir tugged at his straggly beard and managed a tired smile.

'Oh, yes . . . what they say is true. The Princess Zuleira is very beautiful indeed.'

'You have seen her?'

The old man shook his head wryly.

'Few have seen her face . . . and lived,' he explained.

Hasan was in no way checked by this intelligence. He pressed for more details of the girl and was particularly interested to know why such a lovely creature should be the step-daughter of such a villainous caliph. Wazir nestled back into his straw and told his story without rushing it.

'Men say that Alquazar poisoned her father, the rightful ruler of Jadur, in order to marry Zuleira's mother – a woman of surpassing beauty and charm . . . but the mother died, too.' He paused, thinking fondly of the woman, then he gave a philosophical shrug. 'Soldiers who have sworn to defend the princess to their last breath now guard her night and day. She has never set foot outside the palace, not even for a single minute . . .'

'Then she is as much a prisoner as we are,' mused Hasan. His whole frame stiffened with resolve. 'Princess Zuleira must be rescued from such a life. A girl of such renowned beauty should not be treated in that way.'

'Her beauty will not worry you much longer,' sighed Wazir. 'I wish you sweet dreams – on your last night in Jadur.'

Wazir was under no illusions about the fate that lay ahead for the gallant young prince. The penalty for ignoring the curfew was execution and many people had already paid that penalty.

'I must get out of here,' said Hasan, with sudden urgency.

'Impossible, I fear.'

'There has to be a way of escape,' insisted the prince, walking around the cell and inspecting every inch of it.

'There is no way,' said Wazir, accepting defeat.

'I will find one,' promised Hasan.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

And he continued his study of the interior of the cell.

The meeting between the two prisoners had been witnessed by Alquazar, who stared up at a view of the dungeons on the crystalline wall of his secret cavern. He was amused by Hasan's courageous talk and it aroused a degree of admiration in him as well.

'Young, brave and noble,' he murmured to himself. 'I shall put him to the test . . .'

If this was indeed the person who could take the Rose of Elil in his grasp, Alquazar wanted to be quite certain of the man's mettle. He knew exactly how to do that and it did not require any sorcery. At a wave of his hand, the image on the wall faded. Alquazar pulled his voluminous black cloak around him and stepped towards the shaft that led out of the cavern. The flames in the alcoves began to flicker and they died when the sorcerer had departed.

Down in the dungeons the gaoler and his assistant were making their rounds of the prisoners with food. They gave them just enough to keep them alive and spoke crudely to their charges. When they came to the cell in which Hasan and Wazir were confined, the gaoler flung back the bolts, then inserted a key in the lock. His assistant stood by with a tray, on which was a mug of near-stagnant water.

'For the old man,' reminded the gaoler.

'What about the other?'

'Nothing!'

The door now swung open noisily on its hinges and the gaoler's assistant went into the cell with the tray.

'Mealtime, Wazir,' he grunted. 'Nothing for the prince of princes, though. No point in wasting food and water.'

The man stopped in his tracks and looked around in utter astonishment. Hasan had disappeared. There was no sign of him at all and yet there was no possible way that he could have got out of the cell.

'Where is he . . . ?' gasped the man.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'Here!'

Hasan himself answered the question in the most positive way. He had found a metal ring above the cell door and had hauled himself up out of view just before the man had entered. He now hurled himself down on to his adversary, knocking the tray to the floor with a clatter.

'Help!' cried the man.

A well-judged blow from Hasan felled him but the cry had alerted the gaoler. He now came lunging at Hasan with a drawn sword. Skilfully dodging the weapon, the young prince reached down to collect a sword of his own from the fallen man. Prisoner and gaoler were now on equal terms and sparks flew as the steel clashed.

Wazir pressed himself into a corner to keep clear of the flashing blades but he did not have to wait long to know the outcome of the fight. Hasan was by far the superior swordsman. Deftly parrying his opponent's weapon, he caught the gaoler off-balance, forced him back on his heels and then finished him off with a lightning thrust.

Hasan glanced towards Wazir.

'I'll be back, old man.'

'Take care.'

Hasan dashed out through the cell door only to find himself facing more problems. A number of guards, aroused by the commotion, had come to see what was going on. Hasan now had to engage three of them in a desperate swordfight around the torture chamber. Ducking and weaving, he eluded the swishing blades that would have cut him down. He killed one of his assailants, wounded another and drove back the third far enough to give himself a chance to race to the stone steps that curved up towards the palace.

More men came charging down these steps, but Hasan fought his way past them, hurling two of them from a great height on to the floor below. He continued up the steps, warding off his pursuers as he did so,

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

fighting with tremendous zest and displaying all the gifts of a master-swordsman.

When he reached the door at the top of the steps, he threw it open and darted through into a corridor in the palace.

'Take him!'

Bahloul was lurking in the corridor with a cluster of guards. He seemed very annoyed that Hasan had got this far and was determined to halt his progress for good.

'I want him dead!'

The strength and number of his opponents was too much for Hasan and he could do little but retreat at speed, turning every so often to keep the soldiers at bay. Bahloul had his own sword out and was desperate to be the one to kill the young prince. The guard commander roared and cursed as he chased Hasan through the corridors and arcades of the royal palace.

They entered the main lobby with its grand marble staircase. Hasan moved backwards up the steps then leapt a few feet in the air as one sword was aimed at slicing his legs from under him. He was completely on the run now, his only defence being his dexterity as a swordsman and his agility as an athlete. A lesser man would have perished at the hands of the guards long before.

'Now we have him!'

Bahloul smiled grimly as they cornered their quarry against a wall. Hasan would not escape this time.

'Leave him to me!'

Bahloul swung his sword with vicious power and it would have split Hasan in two had he stayed where he was. Instead, feeling behind him with his spare hand, he located the knob of a door and twisted it sharply, jumping through the door as it opened and then slamming it shut behind him.

He lay panting inside the room, his back pressed firmly against the door, his mind racing as he wondered how he could get out of his predicament.

'Oh!'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

A young girl was sitting at her dressing-table and she was shocked by the unheralded intrusion. Hasan had blundered his way into the Princess Zuleira's private chamber. She rose to her feet in alarm.

'Who are you?'

But he was quite bereft of words. For a brief and magical moment, Hasan forgot all about the soldiers outside the door. He was utterly entranced by the beauty of Zuleira, a beauty which he could enjoy to the full because she was not wearing her veil. Reports of her loveliness paled beside its reality and in the fleeting exchange of looks Hasan's heart became hers for ever.

Quite enraptured, he could have gazed at Zuleira all day but Bahloul and his men had other notions. They came bursting through the door in a body, sending Hasan spinning across the room to land at the dainty feet of the princess. Hastily, she drew her veil up to her face and stepped backwards.

'Kill the scum!' ordered Bahloul, and the fight continued.

Hasan had to use every trick he knew to keep the soldiers from overpowering him but the presence of Zuleira gave him renewed strength. He heard her gasp as he severed the wrist of one of his attackers and then there was a stifled scream as a sword sailed within a whisker of his own face.

'Kill him!' yelled Bahloul. 'Kill him!'

Once again retreat was the only course open to Hasan. With the soldiers forcing him across against a wall, he suddenly turned on his heel and jumped through the window. He landed on a balcony below and had a minute to get his bearings. In the room above him he could hear Bahloul berating his soldiers.

'Now then, insect!'

The guard commander himself now leapt down on to the balcony and confronted him yet again. Other soldiers ran to his assistance and Hasan was soon in the greatest danger of being hacked to pieces. In desperation the audacious young prince dived through a latticed window behind him, causing it to shatter loudly.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

He now found himself inside the throne room itself, the hub of the palace, where Alquazar liked to sit in state. The caliph was on his throne when the new guest made his somewhat dramatic entrance; he did not seem at all surprised or perturbed by the appearance of Hasan.

Giant Nubian slaves ran to grab Hasan but their master called them away with a curt command.

'Leave him. I want to watch.'

The slaves left the intruder to Bahloul and his men, who now came clambering in through the smashed window. Hasan, bleeding profusely from a wound on his head, still had the spirit and skill to fight off the attack for several minutes. But the odds were overwhelming and he was at last disarmed.

Two soldiers gripped his arms, while a third pulled his head forward and exposed his neck. Bahloul raised his sword with a vengeance. Hasan had killed or maimed several of his soldiers and he must now be made to pay for that.

As the sword was about to descend through the air, there came a piercing scream from the doorway. The Princess Zuleira was standing there, her hand raised to her mouth in horror.

'No!' she cried.

Alquazar looked across at her, then gestured to Bahloul.

'Spare him.'

The guard commander obeyed, hiding his bitter disappointment as he thrust his sword into his belt. He now had even more cause to resent the Princess Zuleira and he stole a glance at her. The horror in her eyes had been replaced by relief.

Released by the soldiers, Hasan put a hand to his brow and brought it away covered in blood. Guards and slaves now stood around him in a circle, appraising the sturdy and daring newcomer. Khasim, the sly informer, had taken no part in the fight with Hasan but he now pushed his way close to the prince and stood there with

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

his sword drawn. He was always ready to put on a show of bravery when there was no danger at all to himself.

'Welcome to my palace,' smiled Alquazar.

'I have had no welcome at all in your city,' complained Hasan. 'I came to Jadur as a friend.'

Alquazar stepped from his throne and looked taller than ever.

'Prince Hasan, you are an intruder – but a courageous one.'

Bahloul glowered. Hasan's courage had cost him a number of his soldiers and his own reputation as an invincible swordsman.

'Thank my step-daughter for your life,' remarked the caliph. 'Bahloul would have loved to send your head rolling across the floor.'

As Hasan turned to look towards the doorway, Zuleira came tripping across to him, her face now well hidden behind her veil. She leaned over Hasan, who was still on his knees, and their eyes met. All pain left him as he gazed at her.

Zuleira became alarmed and turned to Alquazar.

'He's wounded.'

'It is . . . nothing,' mumbled Hasan.

'Oh, yes, it is,' said Khasim, cheerfully. He peered at the gash. 'That needs seeing to.' Feeling the effect of a glare from Bahloul, he changed his tone at once. 'Er . . . in my humble opinion, that is . . .'

'Do something, step-father,' Zuleira entreated.

Her concern brought a touch of warmth into Alquazar's smile. He could see that she was already prey to a sorcery that was far older than anything he himself knew. The princess – like Hasan – was fast falling under the spell of true love.

Alquazar clapped his hands and his minions jumped forward.

'Bring food and wine for our honoured guest, Prince Hasan. And dress his wounds. Be quick!'

The slaves ran from the throne room in great haste.

'Help him up, Khasim,' suggested the caliph.

The informer gave his arm to Hasan and the latter

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

was soon standing up again, staring with mute gratitude and devotion at the princess.

'You shall want for nothing in my palace, Prince Hasan,' promised Alquazar, hands on hips.

'Your dungeons are less hospitable, Caliph.'

Hasan had not forgotten Wazir and all the other prisoners who were rotting away below the palace. The gaudy magnificence of the throne room was indeed a far cry from the diseased gloom of the cells.

Alquazar's lip curled sardonically.

'You have proved that you deserve . . . better things. Take your ease now. You are among friends.'

Hasan relaxed a little but remained wary of the caliph. He recalled what he had been told about Alquazar by old Wazir and resolved that he would never be caught off-guard by him.

There was a flash of anger in his proud response.

'Some of those here now did not receive me as friends should.' Bahloul caught his attention. 'A man should not try to kill his friend.'

Bahloul was about to splutter a reply but Alquazar spoke first with a smooth, unruffled calm.

'Put all that out of your mind, Prince Hasan. You came to Jadur for a particular purpose.' He looked towards the princess. 'Do not neglect that purpose. I am sure that my step-daughter will find you a worthy suitor.'

Zuleira's eyes endorsed his words and Hasan thought no more about his ill-treatment at the hands of Bahloul. Food and wine arrived and he was conducted to a seat by the princess. Water and bandages were brought and a physician began to bathe and dress his wounds. Zuleira's presence and his own fatigue made Hasan surrender to the care and attention he was now receiving.

Alquazar noted all this with pleasure.

'It is time for you to rest and refresh yourself, Prince Hasan. The Princess Zuleira will see that you are well looked after.' Her smile confirmed this. 'You and I will talk later.'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Hasan saluted the caliph, who strode down the throne room towards the door. He paused and beckoned to Khasim, who fairly raced after him, then stood bowing beside him.

'Yes, master? Yes, master?'

'Come, Khasim, I have work for you . . .'

The darkness of his voice hinted at the kind of work that it would be.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Chapter Five

Dawn brought an end to the curfew and the shopkeepers and tradesmen of Jadur flocked to the market place to assess the damage that had been done to their property. The square was littered with debris and looked like some battlefield on the day after a fierce encounter. Casualties abounded and voices were raised in complaint.

'All my pots . . . cracked . . .'

'Look at this brassware . . . bent out of shape . . .'

'No sign of my cloth . . .'

'Thick carpets . . . torn to shreds . . .'

But life had to go on and they all knew the futility of moaning about what had happened. They got to work and began to clear up the mess that had been left behind by the tornado. Shops were repaired, stalls re-stocked, setbacks and losses accepted with a shrug. The city gates were open again now and fresh fruit was being brought in. It was not long before the market regained some of its old bustle, though there remained a subdued air about it.

'We must find food, Shakti – then we leave.'

Majeed had spent a cold and uncomfortable night on the hard ground. He could not wait to depart from Jadur for good.

'I smell something,' he confided.

Shakti, perched on his shoulder, twitched his own little nose. He obviously smelled it, too.

'Over here,' decided the boy, threading his way through a jumble of people and stall-holders.

The aroma led them to a street kitchen, at which hot food was being cooked in steaming pots. Majeed recognised the customers who were gobbling and slurping outside the kitchen. They were members of the Mauve Gang, the troupe of acrobats who entertained the crowd at the busier hours of the day. They were

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

laughing coarsely at a joke made by their leader, Achmed.

Majeed stood some distance away from them, resentful and afraid of these men who had had such cruel fun at his expense the previous day. As a sizeable chunk of hot meat disappeared down Achmed's throat, Majeed hoped that it would choke him. His hopes were not to be fulfilled, however. Finishing his meal, the leader of the tumblers got up and walked away from his colleagues, only to find a decrepit old woman shuffling in his path.

She was an ancient beggarwoman, blind and pathetic, moving clumsily through the market place with a tin begging bowl held out in front of her. When she bumped into Achmed, he stood back and bowed to her, his voice filled with consideration.

'Let me guide you, old mother,' he offered.

'Thank you, kind son.'

'This way, Queen of the Gutter . . .'

He put his hands gently on her scrawny shoulders and pointed her in a particular direction. It soon became obvious that he was not helping her at all for he had set her walking straight at a fruit stall piled high with fresh provender. Achmed and his men stood by with gleeful expressions.

The beggarwoman stumbled on regardless until she went headlong into the fruit stall and brought down the whole thing. Oranges, peaches and almonds spilled everywhere and the old woman fell over amongst them. Achmed and his troupe almost split their sides laughing at her plight, then they deftly helped themselves to some of the fruit.

Majeed instantly took pity on the beggarwoman and he rushed forward to assist her. Without pausing to thank him, she shuffled away into the crowd.

'Just look – just look!' wailed the fruit seller.

He had spent a long time arranging a display of his wares and all that work and effort had been wasted. Majeed seized the chance to earn himself some breakfast.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'We shall put it all back, master,' he said, bending to pick up the scattered fruit. 'You can help, Shakti.'

The boy and his monkey gathered up the fruit as quickly and carefully as they could and placed it back on the stall. The fruit seller picked up his share and cursed under his breath.

'It wasn't her fault,' Majeed pointed out.

'It was Achmed's,' grumbled the man, glaring across at the leader of the acrobats. 'We all know *his* sense of humour . . .'

Though he went on to mutter about Achmed, he obviously did not dare to ask him for help or for compensation. Some of the fruit had been damaged or trodden upon but what could be salvaged was soon back on the stall again.

'That seems to be all, master,' said Majeed, awaiting his reward.

'Take this.'

'Thank you!'

It was a single bruised peach, scant payment for all the help that Majeed had given. But it was better than nothing and the boy was far too hungry to quibble about it. Bowing and grinning, he scuttled off to the privacy of an alleyway to share his breakfast with Shakti. The two of them admired the peach for a long time as if it were some splendid feast set out before them.

'Truly, it is a banquet, Shakti – and we deserve it!'

Just as he was about to sink his teeth into the peach, he heard a plaintive cry from further down the alleyway.

'Where is Majeed? . . . Where is the boy Majeed?'

It was the old beggarwoman, groping her way towards them. How on earth did she know his name?

'Majeed . . . Majeed . . .'

'I am here, old woman.'

She came right up to him and he was able to take a closer look at her. She was vile and ugly, her face covered in running sores, her breath foul. His first instinct was to move away but he held his ground. Her hand was thrust out.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'Give to the afflicted and you shall be for ever blessed . . .'

Majeed glanced down at the peach, then across at the famished Shakti, then back to the blind hag. She could not possibly know that he had food. It would be simple to lie to her.

'Old woman, I have nothing to give . . .' he began. Then his sympathy came into play and he grinned. 'Only this peach.' He put it into her clutching fingers. 'It is yours.'

'Ah!' she cackled, gripping the fruit tight and leering at him. 'At last . . . at last . . .'

Instead of eating it, she then flung the peach to the ground, where it smashed open. Majeed was dismayed.

'What are you doing? That was our breakfast.'

'Whatever is inside the peach,' she ordered, sternly, 'give it to me.' He hesitated. 'Give it!'

'*Inside* the peach?' he shrugged. 'There are stones inside peaches.'

'Open it up,' she insisted.

Majeed bent down over the peach and began to separate the sticky pieces. What he saw at the centre of the fruit caused him to gape in sheer wonderment. Where he had expected to find a peach stone, he found instead a large blue sapphire.

The beggarwoman was tetchily impatient.

'Is it there – the stone?'

Majeed was struck dumb by the sight of the glittering sapphire and she had to grab his shoulder to make him speak.

'What is it? What is there?' she demanded.

'It's a jewel . . .'

'The Sapphire of Al'Adin!' she cried with joy. 'Give it to me!'

He picked it up with reverence and placed it in her hands. The old woman held it tight and sighed as if an enormous weight had been lifted from her. Closing her eyes, she lifted the jewel slowly to her face, then, in a swift, fluid gesture, she let the sapphire touch her eyelids, her lips and her heart. Majeed was quite baffled.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

The woman now opened her eyes and they were no longer dull and glazed. They were bright, young and shining with happiness.

'I can see! I can see!'

The miracle made Majeed's mouth fall open but there was a greater miracle to come. The beggarwoman raised herself up and stretched her cramped and crooked limbs. Suddenly, there was a shimmer of light where she had been standing and she vanished within it. The light softened and something else began to take shape – the form of a beautiful young woman, dressed in a simple but resplendent sari. She bestowed the most radiant smile upon the awe-struck boy.

'I have waited a thousand years – and now I am free!'

She passed the sapphire to Majeed and he took it in his now trembling hands.

'The jewel is yours, Majeed. Look deep into its heart . . .'

Another radiant smile fell on the boy and then she faded away into thin air as if she had never existed. Though they looked all around the alleyway, they could find no trace of her. At length Majeed remembered the sapphire and held it up to the light so that he could scrutinise it.

'Shakti – there's something *inside* the jewel!' He showed it to the monkey. 'Look – a living creature!'

Right at the heart of the jewel could be seen the head and shoulders of the young woman who had stood beside them a minute before. She laughed at their amazement but it was kind, affectionate laughter.

'Majeed.'

'Yes?'

'This sapphire – once set in the ring of Al'Adin – is now for ever in your service.'

He was quite unable to take it all in at first and it was some time before he had sufficient control of his tongue to blurt out his question.

'Are you the spirit of the ring?'

His manner was a mixture of respect, awe and apprehension.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'I was – a thousand years ago. My name is Vahishta.

'Vahishta . . . Vahishta . . .' He liked the sound of it. 'You are my jinnee princess, then?'

'But I am not your slave,' she said with firmness.

Majeed was captivated by her delicate and incomparable beauty.

'I would willingly be yours,' he confessed to her, shyly.

She acknowledged the compliment with a beaming smile and then she became quietly serious.

'You have served me well enough by freeing me from a life of evil and squalor,' she explained. 'In return, I give you my protection.'

'What have I done to need protection?'

'I speak of the future.'

'Can you see into the future?' he marvelled.

'Three times your life will be in danger – and three times I will be able to save you.'

'How? Tell me what to do.'

'Call my name. Help will come.'

'Yes, but what sort of—?'

'Goodbye, Majeed,' she interrupted. 'Remember – call my name.'

'But I'm not sure what I'm—'

Vahishta had no time to answer his questions. She flashed him a last smile of gratitude and gave her warning.

'Three times only . . . that is all . . .'

And she disappeared from inside the sapphire before he could even blink. No matter how carefully he peered into the jewel, or from what angle, he could see no Vahishta. He gave up trying and decided that the whole thing was a trick of his mind.

'It is hunger that makes me see visions, Shakti. There was no old beggarwoman – there was no peach – there was no sapphire.'

But the jewel in his hand contradicted this and he bit into the stone to test its quality. He yelled, finding it only too real. At least the jewel was not a figment of his imagination.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'Let us go, Shakti. When we have sold this sapphire, we will eat like kings – for the rest of our days!'

Lifting Shakti up to his shoulder, Majeed started to bound towards the market place. His reasoning had an appealing simplicity to it. A precious jewel would bring them a lot of money and that in turn would buy unlimited quantities of food. Majeed at last had something for which he could thank the city of Jadur.

Business in the market had now picked up and there was an appearance of normality once again. But resentments ran deep and the rebels went about their work cursing the caliph's wicked power and yet convinced that there was no way to overthrow him. Long faces and tight lips were to be found in many places, for most of the dissidents were afraid to voice their feelings. Alquazar had already shown that he could hear every word of their rebellious talk.

The goldsmith's shop had escaped the worst of the tornado's effects and its owner was consequently in high spirits. He sat outside his shop with a selection of trinkets set before him on a velvet cloth, enjoying the pleasure of haggling with various merchants and customers.

'It is not worth it!'

'What? I am giving it away, you fool!'

'*How* much did you say?'

'He is a skinflint!'

'Make me a better offer then!'

The men were so engrossed with their argument that they did not notice the small boy who came up behind them. He tried to reach the goldsmith himself but the man was hidden behind a mass of bodies and cloaks. Majeed could see only one way of reaching him and so he got down on his stomach and wriggled between the legs of some of the merchants until he was able to pop up right in front of the fat goldsmith. This man, an astute dealer, who was in the middle of selling something at a handsome profit, was not amused to see the boy appear. His tone was paternal but uncompromising.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'This is no place for street urchins. Beg in the market place – not in my shop!'

Majeed was too excited even to hear this. He came straight to the point with an unguarded honesty.

'I have a precious stone, master. What will you give me for it?'

'A stone?'

The goldsmith exchanged a look with the merchants and then he regarded the boy with polite menace.

'An urchin with a jewel? How did you come by it?'

'It was a gift . . . a reward,' explained Majeed, in his innocence.

'Perhaps I'll recognise it,' said the goldsmith, with a cunning grin, nodding to the merchants so that they closed in and made the boy virtually a prisoner. 'Show it to me.'

Majeed held out his hand and revealed the sapphire that was nestling there. Reaction was immediate and highly favourable. Achmed, standing nearby, wondered what all the merchants were chattering about and he came to see. When he caught sight of the jewel, he was all agog.

The goldsmith was very impressed and he snatched the sapphire greedily so that he could examine it with an eyeglass.

'It is a gem worthy of a prince,' he murmured.

But when he looked at it through his jeweller's glass, it had turned inexplicably into a peach stone. Majeed was totally confused but the goldsmith was quite furious.

'What sort of trick is this?' he yelled.

'It's no trick, master.'

'A peach stone! Here . . . take it!'

And he flung it straight at the boy. With a deft movement of his hand, Majeed managed to catch the stone. When he looked at it, he was astounded to see that it was a sapphire once more and he showed it to the group of merchants all around him.

The face of Achmed, who had observed all of this, was a picture of greed. He slipped away from the shop

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

in search of his men and did not hear the chuckled comments of some of the merchants.

'The boy's a conjurer!'

'A clever one, too.'

'You need to be good to fool Abdullah the goldsmith.'

'How much will you give him for his peach stone, Abdullah?'

Laughter greeted this last comment and it spurred the goldsmith into action. He did not like being made to look a fool.

'I'll give him this!' he shouted, grabbing a cane. 'Come here, you wretch!'

But Majeed had taken to his heels and was dodging his way through the crowd. The goldsmith lumbered after him, waving the cane.

'A good beating is the only reward you'll get from me . . . Come back! Hm! Peach-stone sapphires!'

Majeed was lost in the busiest part of the market and it was impossible to find him. Abdullah the goldsmith abandoned the chase and returned to his shop. He now saw the funny side of it.

'Did you see what he did?' he grinned.

'Best trick I've seen in years,' said one of the merchants.

'I was completely taken in,' admitted the goldsmith, chuckling.

'So was I,' confessed another of the merchants.

'We all were,' said a third.

'How in the name of Allah did he do it?' wondered Abdullah.

They laughed and puzzled over the incident until they were in a thoroughly good humour. The goldsmith chose his moment and then drew their attention to the trinkets on the velvet.

'And now, gentlemen, to business . . .'

While the merchants were discussing Majeed's skill as a conjurer, the Mauve Gang were performing some of their acrobatic routines across on the other side of the market place. They were in good form and the onlookers

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

were highly amused by their comic antics. The human pyramid was the climax of their act and they formed it with their usual slick expertise. As the last man was hauled up to the top of the pyramid, Achmed came dashing through the crowd and collided with his men.

The whole pyramid crumbled to the ground and the audience shook with laughter. They did not know that it was an accident and they warmly applauded what they thought was a part of the act. Achmed got to his feet and took a bow with the rest of his men, then he motioned for them to follow him. They trotted off behind him and were led down a side alley.

Achmed drew them around him and whispered a word of explanation. They looked surprised but pleased and stood by for their cue from their leader. Their wait was a short one because Majeed soon entered the alley at the far end and made his way towards them.

'Positions!' ordered Achmed, clapping his hands, and the Mauve Gang went straight into one of their routines.

As he meandered along between the stalls, Majeed was far too preoccupied to notice the acrobats. He was still baffled by what had happened at the shop of Abdullah the goldsmith. How could a sapphire turn into a peach stone? More important, how could a simple peach stone turn into a sapphire?

He paused beside a cutler's stall and stole a look at the jewel in his cupped hand. His face puckered.

'What is the use of such a jewel, Shakti, if it can't be sold?'

Peeping out of the cloth bag, Shakti jabbered his agreement. The jewel had not brought them one morsel of food and it had almost earned Majeed a beating.

'We will find *something* to eat,' promised the boy, and the monkey settled back into his pouch.

As Majeed went to set off down the alley, a grip of steel closed on his arm. He was pulled into a corner before he knew what was happening and he had the wicked, leering face of Achmed thrust close to his own.

'Let go!' he complained.

'You're staying here,' grinned Achmed.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Majeed saw that he was now surrounded by the acrobats and that there was no means of escape. He tried not to sound afraid.

'What do you want?'

The leader of the Mauve Gang released his arm and the boy rubbed it. Achmed leered at him again.

'You know me. I am your good friend Achmed.' His companions sniggered. 'I deal in lost property. Show me what you have there in your hand.'

'No,' said Majeed, drawing his hand back.

'Show me!' hissed Achmed, seizing the boy's wrist.

'It was a gift! A reward!'

'I'm sure its owner has a different tale to tell . . . eh?'

Majeed was really stung by the insinuation.

'I don't steal!'

'And I'm the King of Egypt!' sneered Achmed. 'Let me see it.'

The boy studied the face before him, with its hooked nose, ugly teeth and sharp features. He became sceptical.

'How do I know that I can trust you?'

'Everyone trusts Achmed!' came the bland reply.

'Do they?'

'Of course. I pay a fair price – and I keep my mouth shut.' He tried to look as honest as he could. 'On my mother's grave.'

Majeed was at once frightened and tempted. If the man really did pay a fair price, it would at least mean that he and Shakti could buy some proper food. The Mauve Gang edged in closer to help him to reach his decision. Their leader's smile was now midway between evil and benevolence.

'Very well,' agreed the boy. 'Here it is.'

He opened his hand to reveal the sapphire and the group around him muttered appreciatively. It was clearly a jewel of great value. Achmed grabbed it so that he could inspect it more closely.

'Ah! What's this?'

He was staring at a peach stone and it made him boil

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

with rage. Slapping the stone back into Majeed's small palm, he spoke with hissed fury.

'Don't try the switch game on me, boy.'

'It's no game, master,' quaked Majeed.

'Where's the sapphire?'

'I don't know . . .'

Majeed was beginning to wish that he had never been given the peach by the fruit seller. It had brought him so much trouble. His misery was complete when he opened his hand to find the sapphire there once more.

'So!' Achmed was livid.

Grasping the boy's ear, he made him writhe with pain.

'Try to diddle Achmed, would you? I'll fix you!'

The Mauve Gang enjoyed this kind of work. They wanted to know their orders.

'How do you want him fixed, Achmed?'

'Dropped in camel dung?'

'Bruises and a few loose teeth?'

'Broken bones?'

'Or would you prefer . . . ?' The man, Mustapha, made an expressive throat-cutting gesture.

'Let us be generous, friends,' said Achmed. 'We shall do all those things to him . . . Aaah!'

His yell was caused by a searing pain in his wrist. Not wishing to part with any of his teeth just yet, Majeed had sunk them deep into Achmed's hand so that he would release his hold. The boy was now haring off down the alleyway towards the market place.

'After him!' howled Achmed and the Mauve Gang gave chase.

Majeed's smallness and speed were an advantage and he had a good start. His pursuers charged after him, brushing people aside violently and knocking more than one to the ground. As they ran, they set up a cry.

'Thief! Stop thief!'

'Murder and robbery!'

'Stop him! Stop him!'

The whole market was soon aware of the chase and several hands tried to clutch Majeed as he shot past. He

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

was too elusive and fear made his little legs move faster than ever. Darting, dodging, jumping and sprinting, he managed to keep a distance between himself and the Mauve Gang behind him.

He raced up a street, turned into an alleyway and then dived down a side alley off that. It was his undoing. He was facing a dead end. When he turned around, he saw with a shudder that his exit was cut off. The Mauve Gang, knives drawn, were moving in on him. Achmed was at the head of them.

'Come here, boy,' he grinned. 'Come here . . .'

Majeed was trapped. There was no way out, no help at hand, no hope. All that he could do was to look up to the heavens and offer a silent prayer. It was a last resort. As he stared up, his eyes widened. Did he really see what he thought he saw?

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Chapter Six

Soft music played in the throne room of the palace and the sunlight that streamed in through the windows made a series of brilliant, shifting patterns upon the floor. Outside on the balcony the heat was stifling, but here inside the atmosphere was cool and refreshing, as the merest breeze whispered through the perfumed air.

Alquazar sat on his throne, a large black figure set against the many-coloured extravagance of his surroundings. On either side of him, reclining on huge, tasselled cushions, were Hasan and Zuleira. True to his word, the caliph had given the prince a royal welcome and no expense had been spared. Hasan's wounds had been dressed and he had been fed on a lavish banquet that would have graced the table of an emperor. His grubby old clothes had been thrown away and he was now costumed in rich apparel, as befitted his position.

'More food, Prince Hasan?' asked Alquazar, and a dozen servants stepped forward, each holding vast gold plates piled high with the choicest of delicacies. 'More wine, then?' rejoined the caliph, as his guest ignored the proffered food.

But Hasan did not seem to hear.

'Away!'

The servants scurried out at their master's command, taking the remains of the banquet with them. Alquazar gazed with satisfaction at his young guest, not at all offended that the latter had paid no attention to his invitation. Hasan was too absorbed in staring at the princess to listen to anyone else. This suited the caliph's purpose and he was content.

Zuleira, modestly veiled, was very much aware of the clear, brown eyes that were fixed upon her in mute adoration. Even in his rough clothing and battered condition, Hasan had attracted her at once. Now, dressed in the costly robes of a prince, he had a poise

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

and a nobility that were irresistible, and though she tried to avert her own eyes, they were drawn back time and again to his.

They looked at each other once more and Hasan's respectful but passionate stare touched an answering chord in her heart. A flash of recognition passed between them as they both acknowledged a bond that they knew would be eternal.

If Alquazar approved of all this, Bahloul most certainly did not. Skulking nearby, he noted the moment of recognition and jealousy welled up inside him. Hasan had not only withstood the attack of his soldiers, he had now captured the love of the beautiful Zuleira, a girl whose loneliness Bahloul himself longed to cure.

There was something else about Hasan that aroused the envy of the guard commander. In his belt the young prince had a superb, curved sword that was sheathed in a scabbard encrusted with jewels. The sight of this weapon made Bahloul long to possess it.

Alquazar decided that the silent courtship had gone on long enough. He addressed the others with stern dignity.

'Prince Hasan . . . Zuleira . . .'

They turned towards him, knowing all too well that he held the key to any relationship between them.

'My step-daughter's beauty is known throughout the length and breadth of Arabia,' said the caliph.

'Men have lied,' asserted Hasan. 'The Princess Zuleira is lovelier than any words can express. All description insults her.'

Beneath her veil Zuleira's cheek blushed at the compliment.

'Many others have asked for the hand of the princess in marriage,' continued Alquazar, 'but none of them has come this far.'

'They were all unworthy of her, Caliph. As I know I am.'

Zuleira fought an impulse to tell him that he was more than worthy of her. She lowered her eyes and let her step-father do the talking.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'You journeyed here alone and survived many hazards.' He spared a smile for the scowling Bahloul. 'You even survived a fight with Bahloul and his men. That is a rare achievement. You are a brave and honest man, Prince Hasan, and you are most welcome in my kingdom.'

'You honour me greatly, Caliph . . .'

'In token of my esteem, I offer you all the riches at my command.'

'I have no need of riches,' decided Hasan. He gazed back at the princess. 'Zuleira is my only desire.'

'She is yours . . .'

The lovers instantly turned to each other with joy but Alquazar's next words checked them.

'She is yours – if you can win her.'

'I will do anything,' boasted the prince.

'You have already proved yourself in many ways but there is one more test. One more very special test . . .'

Hasan did not worry how onerous the test might be.

'Tell me what it is,' he demanded.

'It is fraught with danger, my young friend. Do not rush into it before you have considered what it entails.'

'I would face any danger in order to win Zuleira!'

The brave words brought a wisp of a sneer to Alquazar's lips but he made sure that nobody saw this. He became confidential.

'You must go on an expedition into the unknown, Prince Hasan.'

'The unknown?'

'Your very life will be at risk.'

Hasan looked at Zuleira and his answer was firm and immediate.

'I offer it willingly.'

'As Zuleira's champion?'

She did not detect the ironic note in her step-father's remark. She was enthralled instead by the idea of Hasan involved in some kind of chivalric exploit on her behalf.

'As my champion!' she confirmed.

'For her, I would achieve the impossible,' announced Hasan.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

He, too, was entranced by the notion of being her champion and his spirit soared. Alquazar let the young couple exchange more looks of devotion and then he outlined the task ahead.

'Then bring me the Rose of Elil!'

Excitement, wonder and fear mingled together in the reactions of both Hasan and Zuleira. It was fear that was uppermost in her mind and she appealed to him for reassurance.

'Surely no man could succeed in that task.'

'Yes, Zuleira. There is such a person.'

'Only the bravest of princes would even attempt it,' she said.

Bahloul agreed with her. It was not a task which he himself would care to undertake because he knew how many others had come to grief in their quest for the magic flower. He could not suppress a sneaking admiration, therefore, when Hasan spoke up with courage and determination.

'I will bring it to you, Caliph.'

'And the dangers . . . ?'

'They are nothing. I will bring you the Rose.'

His confidence made Alquazar warm to him. The caliph stood up and placed an avuncular hand on the young man's shoulder.

'I, too, can be generous,' he affirmed. 'Return safely with the talisman – and you shall have Zuleira as your bride.'

'I accept!' Hasan paused, as a doubt flitted across his mind. 'If Zuleira will take me . . .'

'With all my heart!' she vowed.

Bahloul's jealousy rose to fever pitch as he observed the radiant charm with which Zuleira accepted Hasan as her betrothed. The guard commander would have given a year's pay to be standing where the prince now stood. His private hope was that Hasan would never come back alive from his quest for the Flower of Mercy.

'So be it,' consented Alquazar, taking the hands of the couple in his own. 'My blessing on your safe return, Prince Hasan.'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'And mine,' added Zuleira.

'But not mine,' muttered Bahloul to himself.

'I shall return,' said Hasan with certainty. He put a hand on the hilt of his sword. 'I know how to protect myself.'

'As you have demonstrated,' noted Alquazar, his tone conveying an unspoken rebuke for Bahloul. 'But one sword will not be enough, Hasan. You shall have a bodyguard.'

'I do not need one,' protested the other.

'But I insist. He is a man who has been especially picked for his strength and for his loyalty.'

Hasan glowered at Bahloul, fearing that he might be the bodyguard. He had not forgotten how close he came to death at the hands of the brutal guard commander. But his assumption was quite wrong because Alquazar had someone else in mind.

A clap of the caliph's hands brought the bodyguard hurrying in.

'I come to do your will, master.'

It was Khasim, unctuous as ever, bowing for all he was worth. He was motioned forward by Alquazar.

'I place Prince Hasan in your care,' he told the informer. 'Serve him well.'

'To the end!' promised Khasim, bowing lower than ever.

Alquazar loathed the creature but knew that he was the right man for the task; Bahloul simply stared at Khasim with open disgust; Hasan accepted him without reservation. But Zuleira frowned. Something told her that Khasim was not to be trusted and that her betrothed would be unwise to depend on him.

Her step-father might have read her thoughts.

'You can rely on Khasim at all times, Hasan,' he said, smoothly. 'I have told him exactly what he must do.'

Khasim produced his lowest bow yet and Bahloul, directly behind him, was sorely tempted to swing his boot. Having no more to say about the quest for the Rose at this stage, Alquazar nodded a farewell to Hasan

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

and the princess, then swept out. Servants ran after him and the ingratiating Khasim broke into a trot.

Apart from the guards, only Bahloul remained with the young couple. He lingered self-consciously, reluctant to leave them. Zuleira soon tired of his intrusive presence.

'Do you have somewhere to go, Bahloul?'

'Yes, Princess,' he grunted. 'Excuse me . . .'

As the guard commander left, Zuleira turned back to Hasan and smiled sweetly behind her veil. He was indeed worthy to be her champion.

In the secrecy of his cavern Alquazar stepped up on to the stone balcony that faced the wall of crystal. He needed to seek advice from his soul-image and he summoned it up with an imperious wave of his arm. His own face appeared before him in the strange mirror and his own voice addressed him.

'You want me, master?'

'I have the man who can take the Rose of Elil for me.'

'Prince Hasan has nobility and virtue. Only such a one can pluck the flower from the place where it grows.'

'And once it is plucked?'

The soul-image seemed to feel the weight of a great burden and its shoulders sagged a little. Alquazar pressed for an answer.

'Once Hasan has plucked the flower . . . what then?'

'Any man may hold it with safety.'

The sorcerer celebrated his pleasure with a loud, satanic laugh. Khasim merely had to carry out his orders and the Rose of Elil would come into his charge.

'I will hold you to your word, master,' reminded the soul-image.

'What? . . . Oh yes, yes . . . you shall have your freedom. Afterwards.'

'It is a terrible sacrifice to make . . . letting the Flower of Mercy pass to someone like you . . . but I must be free . . .'

Alquazar now directed the discussion towards the

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

practicalities of seizing the Rose from the garden in which it grew.

'How do they reach it? Tell me – show me . . .'

Almost alone at last, Hasan and Zuleira sat either side of the massive throne and wished that they could reach out and touch each other. But the Nubian guards who flanked the throne prevented them from showing even the politest affection. Silent but all-seeing, the giant guards imposed all kinds of restraints on them and they had to express their true feelings in glances, gestures and subtle innuendoes.

'There may be dreadful dangers ahead,' warned Zuleira.

'I am not afraid,' he returned.

'My step-father spoke of going into the unknown . . . who can say what perils may lurk there?'

'I shall fight my way through,' he asserted. 'In your name.'

'Yes . . .' Zuleira talked with a winning candour. 'I shall miss you very much. I shall think about you while you are gone.'

'And I about you, Princess!'

Even the presence of the muscular chaperones beside the throne could not make the princess hold back from giving a long sigh.

'I long for your return!' she confessed.

Reaching out with her soft and sensuous fingertips, she touched the scabbard of his sword which was resting across his knees.

'I know that you will do battle bravely, Hasan . . .'

His eyes were fires of passion now and she made no attempt to avoid them. Dismissing all maidenly modesty, she met his stare boldly and continued to fondle the scabbard. Hasan drew the blade half out with care and then thrust it back. He was reminded of how the sword had become his and the cold realities of his situation were borne in upon him.

'It was my father's sword. He entrusted it to me.'

'But you are not a man of violence,' she claimed.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'I have to defend myself,' he explained, then he tilted his head with pride. 'I have sworn to use it only against evil and injustice.'

Zuleira wanted to throw herself into his arms but that was quite out of the question. Instead, she took the sword and scabbard gently from him and lifted it to her lips.

'Let it protect and serve you, always . . .'

She kissed the sword hilt softly and his yearning became almost unbearable. For the love of this girl, Hasan would be prepared to go through the most unspeakable torments.

The mood was broken by the re-entry of Alquazar and his court. Striding in with regal bearing, the caliph took up his position by the throne. Khasim followed him in and bowed whenever given the chance. Hasan took back his sword and slipped it through his belt before looking up at Alquazar.

'Is your determination still strong, Hasan?' asked the caliph.

'It is!' he retorted.

'You may change your mind, if you wish.'

'I will not turn back now. I am anxious to be put to this test so that I may win the happiness of marriage to Princess Zuleira.'

'Then it is best you leave now—' decided Alquazar.

'Oh!' It seemed rather sudden to Zuleira.

'—while the stars favour your journey. I always consult the stars.' He indicated Khasim, who was just surfacing from his latest bow. 'You and your bodyguard must be on your way.'

'But how do we travel?' inquired the prince. 'Are there no maps to guide us? Do we need horses, camels, a boat even . . . ?'

'You will see.'

A signal made the doors open and in came Bahloul, guarding a slave who was carrying a locked metal coffer. Hasan and Khasim collected a surly look from the guard commander, but the latter was careful not to let his master see this.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'Put it down,' he growled at the slave.

The coffer was set down before the throne and the slave backed out of the room. Bahloul awaited his orders as everyone in the room tried to imagine what the long metal box contained. Alquazar let the suspense build up slightly and then pointed a finger.

'Open it!'

Bahloul unlocked the coffer and flung back the lid. People craned their necks to see what was inside. How could a metal coffer in any way assist two men on a long and perilous journey?

'Take out what is inside, Khasim.'

Grinning excitedly and enjoying a rare chance to relieve Bahloul of a duty, Khasim reached in and took out the object that was inside. With a flourish, he unrolled it on the floor so that it was fully stretched out. Everyone was baffled. What use was a carpet?

'This has the power to take you to the island of Elil,' announced the caliph.

'A carpet?' Hasan could not believe it.

'This is no ordinary carpet,' he was informed. 'Watch.'

The carpet trembled and shook before rising a few inches off the marble. It hovered in mid-air, to the complete amazement of Hasan and Zuleira, and it had a very bad effect on Khasim's already suspect courage. He began to have doubts about the mission on which he was being sent.

'The carpet needs no command,' explained Alquazar.

'But how does it know where to go?' puzzled Hasan.

'Just set foot on it and it will take you at once to the place that you seek – Elil!'

Khasim gulped, not at all sure that he wanted to risk his weight on anything as flimsy as a flying carpet.

'Once we are there, how do we find the Magic Rose?' asked Hasan.

It was a question which Alquazar had himself put to his soul-image and he now returned the answer that he had been given.

'Fate and courage will guide you to that mystery.'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'Can't you give us more help than that, master?' bleated Khasim.

'I can do nothing more.'

Zuleira had been studying the flying carpet with growing concern. It did not look strong enough to carry two grown men and she feared for Hasan's safety. If he himself had qualms, he kept them hidden behind a quiet smile. Khasim was plainly scared.

'Step on to the carpet,' commanded Alquazar.

'Er . . . you first, Prince,' offered the nervous bodyguard.

Hasan stepped bravely on to the front edge of the carpet and stood upright on it as it floated above the ground. Khasim climbed aboard with apprehension and difficulty, and ended by crouching on the carpet behind the prince.

'Take care, Hasan,' whispered Zuleira.

He smiled at her to show that he was not frightened. In order to win her, he was prepared to do far more than simply ride on a flying carpet.

'I am ready,' he declared.

'I am not,' whimpered Khasim, liking the whole notion of the journey to Elil less and less.

'Clear the way, Bahloul,' said Alquazar.

The big man marched across to the main window and threw back the shutters. As if in response to a signal, the carpet rose slightly, turned on its axis, and then glided gently towards the open window. Alquazar observed all this with gratification but he made no gesture of farewell. Bahloul's response was a rather mechanical salute as Hasan and his bodyguard drifted past.

The carpet hovered outside the palace window for a moment and Hasan was able to wave goodbye. Zuleira rushed to the balcony in time to offer a last desperate, whispered farewell.

'Allah be with you, Hasan!'

Rising steadily all the time, the carpet began to move off over the roof of the palace and away in the direction of the city. The quest for the Rose of Elil had begun.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Chapter Seven

Majeed was not mistaken. There in the sky, flying at low altitude over the rooftops, was a magic carpet with two human beings on it. The boy goggled. Jadur really was the most extraordinary place, with its sinister curfews, its demonic wind, its oppressed people, its jinnee princess, its peach-stone sapphire – and now this! Whatever else it might be, Jadur was certainly full of surprises.

'Leave him to me,' said Achmed.

The voice made Majeed look back down the alley where danger loomed large in the shape of the Mauve Gang and their ruthless leader. Achmed fingered the blade of his knife and moved in for the kill. Majeed knew that he would be cut to ribbons unless he did something. One faint hope was left to him and he snatched at it desperately. Gripping the sapphire tightly in one hand and Shakti even more tightly in the other, he wished with all his might that he could be on the magic carpet.

'If you can truly save my life, Vahishta . . .'

Before he could even complete his wish, Majeed was suddenly gone from the alleyway. Vahishta had understood what he desired and she had saved him from the vengeful acrobats in the nick of time. For their part, they were totally baffled. Mouths agape, they stared at the spot where Majeed had stood but a second before.

'Where is he?' gasped Achmed.

'The boy is a sorcerer,' decided one of his men, alarmed.

'Don't meddle any more with him, Achmed,' advised another.

'But where has he gone?'

While Achmed was scratching his head in amazement, Majeed was clinging to the back of the magic carpet for dear life. He had been dropped on to the carpet behind

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

the two men and they obviously had no idea that he was there.

The carpet was climbing higher and higher into the azure sky and picking up speed in such a way that its passengers were left quite breathless. Hasan's cloak flapped in the wind, Khasim's teeth were chattering, Majeed's heart was in his mouth and Shakti was curled up in a ball of apprehension inside his cloth pouch.

Majeed looked down at the city, which was getting smaller and smaller all the time. He had intended to leave Jadur that day in any case but not by this means!

They were soon over open desert, moving above the arid landscape with a swiftness that was both unnerving and exhilarating. Hasan had conquered any fears that he might have had and was staring ahead with the utmost interest. Khasim was trying to hide his anxieties behind a throaty chuckle as he crouched on the carpet. Neither of them was aware that they had company until Hasan looked over his shoulder.

'Majeed!' He was astounded but pleased.

'Greetings, master.'

The boy was delighted to recognise his friend and did not ask how a man who had been dragged through the dirt by the Curfew Guard came to be dressed in such fine apparel. He was getting used to such incredible things.

'Where did you spring from?' wondered Hasan, laughing.

Majeed did not know how to begin to explain and so he shrugged and grinned at his friend.

'I told you – strange things happen in Jadur . . .'

If Hasan was glad to see the boy, Khasim most certainly was not. He viewed Majeed as an intruder who was going to upset his plans and had nothing but a glare to offer him.

'I'm not sure I like it up here,' confessed Majeed.

'Hold tight!' called Hasan. 'There's no going back now.'

The desert raced past beneath them and then came to an end at a great range of mountains with heavy snow

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

on their peaks. Thick white cloud obscured the sun and the temperature fell like a stone. The passengers shivered in the cold and Majeed, poorly covered by his rags, huddled behind the bulk of Khasim for warmth. Amused by this, the man gave a loud guffaw.

'Even the eagle does not fly so fast,' complained Majeed.

Khasim guffawed again and then saw something ahead which checked the laugh in his throat and made him turn white.

'What is it, master?' he asked.

'Trouble, Khasim. Serious trouble.'

Beyond the mountains they could see an ocean and out of its turbulent waves a storm cloud was rising like an angry fist. They were heading straight for it and were completely at its mercy.

'This is where the challenge begins,' said Hasan.

Alquazar, too, viewed the approaching storm with great alarm. As he watched the progress of the magic carpet by means of the wall of crystal in his cavern, he began to fear for its safety and for the life of Prince Hasan. Without him the sorcerer would never capture the Rose of Elil.

The storm cloud had grown to enormous proportions now and the carpet was a minute spot of colour against its consuming blackness. A first flash of lightning singed its way through the cloud and sent fire spiralling down into the lashing waves. Rain fell in a fierce torrent and a wind of hurricane force shrieked its warning.

Caught right in the heart of the storm, the carpet seemed certain to be overwhelmed. The three figures upon it were soaked to the skin, blown to pieces and savaged by the searing cold. Yet somehow, impossibly, they hung on and withstood it all. Majeed, the least able to bear the whip of the wind and rain, turned away and crouched at the very edge of the carpet.

Alquazar spotted this and he moved in closer.

'Get rid of him, Khasim,' he hissed. 'Get rid of the boy . . .'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

The carpet continued on its way like a cork on the surface of a bubbling cauldron. Shafts of lightning shot past it and illumined the pale faces of its passengers. Thunder rumbled and made the whole sky a vast echoing vault of anger. The sea had become wrathful and sent huge waves leaping upwards, coiling their way towards the magic carpet like the tentacles of some monstrous octopus. At any moment, it seemed, the defenceless figures would be swallowed up by the ocean, which was now goading them with showers of stinging spray.

'Master! Master!' Majeed was terrified.

'Hold on, Majeed,' shouted Hasan.

'But not too tight,' murmured Khasim, who had heard the command from Alquazar, in spite of the deafening noise of the elements.

The carpet bucked and reared and dipped down towards the enraged waves. Another shaft of lightning sizzled close by and more spray shot up to blind them. As Hasan was wiping his eyes, Khasim saw his opportunity and took it, literally, with both hands.

'Let me help you, sprat,' he chuckled.

And he pushed Majeed off the edge of the carpet and down through the air. He pulled a face of comic sadness, then addressed Hasan.

'Master, look! We've lost the boy!'

'How?' Hasan was deeply shocked.

'The wind blew him off,' supposed Khasim. There could not have been more pain in his expression if Majeed had been his own son. 'I tried to help him . . . but it was no use.'

'Swing the carpet round,' decided Hasan.

'What?'

'We must try and save him. Quick!'

Hasan did his best to wrench the carpet off its course but to no avail. Even as he was struggling to turn it one way, Khasim was doing the exact opposite behind his back.

'No good, master,' he wailed. 'This carpet has a mind of its own, I fear.'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Dejected and miserable, Hasan looked over the side of the carpet into the venomous darkness below. Majeed, who had once been so kind to him in Jadur, was now falling to some horrible death.

'I have lost a good and trusted friend,' Hasan sighed, and his comment was intended as an epitaph.

Majeed, meanwhile, was still very much alive, though he was hurtling down through space at a ferocious speed. Clouds, mist, rain and spray were all around him: he felt that he was at death's door yet again. His last resort was the sapphire and he gripped it until it hurt his young hand.

'Vahishta . . . save me! Save me!'

Unaware of his cry or its meaning, Hasan and Khasim stayed on the carpet and weathered the storm as it reached new heights of ire. Wrapped in his cloak and grimacing at each new blaze of lightning, the informer began to fear that they themselves would soon meet the same fate as Majeed. The young prince, still seated at the front of the carpet, was filled with grief and let his head slump forward in despair. The boy had indeed been a good friend.

Oblivious to all around him, Hasan did not notice when the storm began to abate. The lightning ceased, the rain faded to a gentle drizzle and the sea was becalmed. As the last bellow of thunder died away, the darkness began to lighten and the carpet rose through a fine mist into a warmer and more welcoming atmosphere.

'Lord Hasan . . . the storm is past.'

'What?' He did not even look up.

'We have come through it safely,' laughed Khasim.

Hasan showed no interest at all until he felt an eager hand shaking him.

'Look, master . . . look!'

'Leave me, Khasim.' His mind was still on Majeed.

'But look – down there!'

This time Hasan took the advice and his sadness

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

evaporated at once. Directly below them, thrust up out of the sea, was a small island. Its shape was eerie, its aspect menacing, but it made the two men leap about on the carpet in elation.

'We have reached it, Khasim . . . the island of Elil!'

Their excitement was reflected in the grim sparkle of Alquazar's eyes. He had been staring up at his magic mirror throughout the storm and he was relieved that the carpet had survived it intact. The sight of the island of Elil, home of the coveted Flower of Mercy, thrilled him. He had been annoyed and puzzled when Majeed had suddenly appeared on the flying carpet, placed there by some magic that was beyond even Alquazar's comprehension. But he had signed the boy's death warrant with his command to Khasim and the informer, despicable but reliable, had put it into effect.

Gliding down through the mist that enshrouded Elil, the carpet now headed towards a rocky gorge. Everything was going according to plan and the caliph rubbed his palms together with relish.

The magic carpet made a soft landing in the gorge and became quite limp. It might have been one of Abu's carpets, laid out in the incongruous setting of a deep rift in the rocks.

'I hope it can fly back home,' observed Khasim.

'It will get us there,' assured Hasan.

'It may get *me* there,' thought the other, then he spoke out. 'It's like a graveyard here . . . let's move on.'

'This way,' said Hasan, as Khasim rolled up the carpet.

The sides of the gorge towered above them and a lesser man than Hasan would have been intimidated. Khasim certainly was and he looked around uneasily. Half-buried in the sand on the floor of the gorge were several gigantic stone heads with brutal, distorted features. The faces were like those of fossilised demons and Khasim felt that the stone eyes were watching him.

'Keep moving, master. Keep moving . . .'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'We can go no faster,' said Hasan.

Their voices echoed and re-echoed around the gorge and disturbed a silence that seemed to be centuries old. They struggled on slowly, climbing over falls of rock slurry and trudging ankle-deep through the hot sand. At the far end of the gorge was a glimpse of distant foothills covered in wooden scrub. Behind these, dominating them with a majestic menace, was an immense, lifeless volcano.

'It will take us all day to walk that far,' moaned Khasim.

'The Rose may be nearer than we imagine,' hoped Hasan.

'It's not in this tomb of a valley!'

'Who knows?'

'There's nothing here except . . . aaah!'

His leg had struck against a jagged rock. He hopped around on one foot, hugging the injured leg to himself. When he walked on, it was with far greater care. The stone heads, with their weird, tortured faces, watched blankly. Khasim felt more and more that they were in some valley of doom.

'Up ahead!' pointed Hasan, encouraged.

'Where?'

'In those rocks.'

At the end of the gorge was a tumble of rocks that caught the full glare of the sun. Something was glinting brightly in the dark stone and Hasan was convinced that it was there to help them.

'A sign, Khasim!'

'Could it be the Rose itself, master?'

'That would be too easy,' decided Hasan, but his manner was cheerful. 'Let us find out.'

They scrambled along with greater speed as the object in the rocks continued to guide them towards its sparkle.

Alquazar stared at his magic mirror with irritation. The two men were moving far too slowly for his liking, impeded as they now were by big boulders and sand

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

dunes. He watched until his patience ran out completely then he dismissed the image on the crystalline screen. In its place was his own face, the mournful countenance of his soul-image.

'Yes, master?'

'Their progress is more cautious than that of a snail!'

'It will take time,' soothed the soul-image. 'Your impatience will not make them get there any faster.'

'Keep them in your sight,' ordered Alquazar. 'Warn me as soon as they reach the Garden of the Rose.'

'As you wish . . .'

The face vanished from the wall and Alquazar stepped down from his position on the balcony. He headed for the shaft which led out of the cavern. Once there, he pulled his cloak about him and began to float downwards until he reached the bottom. From there he could see the tunnel stretching out before him, with its slender bridge offering a narrow passage over the seething lava beneath it.

He paused to study the bridge for a moment and then tightened his lips in annoyance as the lava basin began to hiss and bubble. Flames shot up everywhere and the noise of steam was ear-splitting. The bridge was right in the centre of it all and seemed to be quite impassable, a delicate arch of burning rock.

Alquazar regarded the holocaust with a hurt dignity and he spoke with curt authority.

'Be still! It is your master that comes to you!'

But whether out of playfulness or disobedience, the flames continued to roar and lick the bridge, confronting the sorcerer with a wall of fire. Angry but unafraid, he stepped on to the bridge and walked across it with measured stride. The flames flared up even more and the heat was overpowering but Alquazar went into the very heart of the fire. Any mortal man would have been burned to a cinder in the blaze but he reached the other side of the bridge quite unscathed.

'And now – be still!' he snarled.

Like a disobedient dog coming to heel for its master,

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

the lava subsided to become a meek bubbling and the flames turned to thin wisps of smoke.

'He must be in there,' Zuleira insisted. 'Let me see.'

'Your step-father is at work,' announced Bahloul, brusque to the point of insolence.

'I want the caliph,' she continued.

'He is not to be disturbed,' came the polite rebuff.

They were standing outside the throne room and Bahloul was preventing her from going in. When he had first met Princess Zuleira on the marble steps of the lobby, desire had stirred him yet again but his manner remained cold and impassive.

'I wish to see him – now!' she snapped. 'He may have news of Hasan.'

Bahloul did not mind arousing her spirit in this way. It made her even more appealing. He chose his words carefully and spoke them with quiet relish. Resenting the fact that she could never be his, he took pleasure in dashing her hopes of marriage to the man of her choice.

'You can forget Hasan. You'll never see him alive again . . .' He bowed with a hint of mockery, '. . . Princess.'

Bahloul marched off and she was left there flushed and shaken. Was he really speaking about her beloved Hasan? She had to learn the truth. With an even stronger reason to see her step-father now, she ran towards the doors of the throne room. Guards opened them to admit her and she went in anxiously. The place was empty.

'Step-father! Step-father!'

The room was bare and silent and, she now noticed, rather oppressive in a peculiar sort of way. She crossed to stand before the ornate throne, symbol of Alquazar's power over his dominions. Something about it began to unsettle her in a way that it had never done before. Beyond the throne was the door to his secret room and she now tripped towards it, her diaphanous gown flowing out behind her.

No sooner had she reached the door than it swung

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

open to allow the caliph himself to step out. Relieved and delighted, she went up to him but his tone was stern.

'Why are you here, child?'

'I simply had to speak to you.' She could not take her eyes off the doorway. 'What is through there?'

'I have told you, Zuleira. Nothing that concerns you.' The door shut itself before she had a chance to peer inside. 'You wanted to speak to me?'

'Yes.' She remembered what she had been told and became quite flustered. 'Bahloul said . . . that Hasan will never return.'

'He knows nothing,' sneered Alquazar with contempt.

'Then there *is* news of Hasan?'

He could not bring himself to crush the hope in her question and, wishing to be rid of the subject altogether, he answered with as much charm as he could muster.

'Hasan is safe.'

'You're not lying to me?' she asked, thrilled.

'Of course not. I have seen him. He has reached Elil.'

Her delight changed to suspicion and he realised that he had said too much to her. Disillusion sounded in her next words.

'But . . . how could you know that?'

'You expect too many answers!' he said, sharply.

'If you have *seen* Hasan . . .' she puzzled.

'Enough! Be satisfied with what you have heard.'

He was not her step-father any more. He was the caliph of Jadur, above being interrogated by a subject, proud, omnipotent, peremptory.

'Leave me!'

Zuleira did not stop to argue. In such moods, Alquazar was always best avoided. She vanished as fast as she could between the pillars of the throne room. Satisfied that she had gone, Alquazar glanced back at the door.

He was angry with Bahloul for having given information to the princess and he made a mental note to dress down the man. What made him even more irritated was the fact that he himself had inadvertently

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

let slip the information that he had actually watched Hasan arrive on the island of Elil. Zuleira was an intelligent girl. He hoped that she would not start to make deductions about what he did behind the sealed door of his mysterious cavern.

With people to see and orders to give, he stalked out of the throne room in a state of subdued rage. He was too absorbed in his own thoughts to hear the faint rustle of silk behind one of the pillars. Zuleira, finding the courage to defy his command, had hidden herself there and she peeped out as soon as he had left.

Alquazar's indiscretion had planted a seed of doubt in her fertile mind. She now saw him in a very different light and she was not all reassured by his remarks about Hasan. If Alquazar did have some means of seeing her prince, then it lay behind the forbidden door.

She checked that she was perfectly alone before crossing to the wall behind the throne. The door was small, strange, unwilling to open for her. Try as she might, she could not budge it but her determination did not falter.

'If it will open for the Caliph Alquazar, it will open for me!'

Without realising it, she had spoken the magic word – Alquazar. The door swung open at her behest and she looked through to see the narrow tunnel cleft in the rock. Her heart was pounding and her pulse racing but the thought of Hasan gave her the spirit to go on. With a mixture of curiosity and trepidation, she stepped through the door and into the tunnel.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Chapter Eight

The world into which Princess Zuleira now entered was totally removed from anything she had known before. She had been reared and kept within the walls of the palace of Jadur all her life and she was used to the luxury of superb rooms, over-attentive servants, exquisite clothing and rich food. Hers had been a life of cloistered innocence and it had in no way prepared her for what she was about to see.

The first shock came when the little door heaved to behind her and locked itself. She was in the presence of the occult and this realisation made her blood run cold. Even in the entrance to the tunnel, she could feel the throb of some dark, supernatural power and she longed for the world of light which she had just left. But she could not go back now.

Creeping along the rock passageway, she arrived at the cavern with its bridge, its bubbling lava and the surrounding void. The pool was largely quiescent, its bubbles popping merrily on the surface and its fire scarcely visible. Though the bridge looked rather narrow, it was the only way across and it seemed relatively safe. She fought the impulse to turn back and, lifting her pretty chin up, she advanced bravely to the edge of the pool.

Without daring to look down, she went steadily over the bridge and faced the shaft beyond. Swirling mists made it impossible to see anything in the shaft and her suggestive imagination got the better of her. In a blind panic, she swung round and tried to go back over the bridge. But her mind was changed for her.

The lava became agitated and great, vindictive flames shot up into the roof of the cavern. Even the stone bridge itself appeared to be on fire. Driven back by the heat, Zuleira began to perspire and tremble. She was trapped now and simply had to go on. Hands out-

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

stretched and gown trailing in the black dust on the floor, she groped her way into the darkness of the shaft. The rock walls were clammy and unpleasant to touch. When she felt some small furry creature run across her foot, she almost died with fear.

There was a greater shock to come. Out of nowhere a swirling wind suddenly arose and she was somehow drawn upwards through the air. She was floating and her gown was rippling all around her. The wind which lifted her was gentle but persistent and it took her on a bizarre journey through the coloured mists of the tunnel shaft.

Zuleira was in the grip of some strange power and she was quite unable to resist or to cry out for help. She had to endure the nightmare ascent through the eerie shaft and all she could do was to pray that she would survive it. When she reached the top, the wind dropped and she was left standing at the entrance to Alquazar's cavern. She walked into it.

Where her step-father had moved about with an arrogant authority, she could only creep and tiptoe. Flames ignited in the alcoves all around the cavern and this caused her to jump back. The sense of being in a domain of evil was now stronger than ever. Was this where Alquazar spent so much of his time?

Her frail figure was dwarfed by the size of the cavern and wherever she turned she saw new reasons to be afraid. Alquazar had obviously protected the route to his cavern from intruders, hence the murderous flames that had attacked her on the bridge. She now suspected more traps and moved with a tentative step.

It was her love for Prince Hasan and her need to know where he was that had brought her to the cavern. As she looked around the place, she could see no means by which she could learn the truth about her betrothed. Did the secret lie in one of the great tomes lying on the table? Was it to be found in the astrological chart that was set up on one wall? Or was it something to do with the powders and potions that were scattered about?

With her back to the crystalline wall, she studied the

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

cavern in more detail. She reacted to the voice behind her as if she had been stabbed in the back.

'Zuleira . . .'

It was Alquazar! She spun round to see his face in the magic mirror that had been quite blank a moment before.

'Step-father!'

It looked like Alquazar and it sounded like him but there was something in its expression – a hint of melancholy, perhaps – that told her it was not her step-father. The face was many times larger than she was and she had to summon up all her courage before she found the nerve to address it.

'What are you?'

'I am the soul of Alquazar, my child.'

'The soul?'

'His sacrifice to the Evil Ones. Alquazar sold his soul in return for the power to command the dark forces of nature.'

Zuleira could not understand it all. Her mystification was almost as great as her distress.

'He is a sorcerer?'

'The greatest in all Arabia,' said the soul-image.

'And yet he seeks the Rose of Elil . . .'

'His powers are immense but they are never enough to satisfy him. He must always enlarge them.'

Zuleira's brow wrinkled as she tried to work it out. Everyone had heard of the fabled Rose of Elil and its remarkable qualities. But it was a source of goodness, hence its other name, the Flower of Mercy.

'What use is the Rose to my step-father?' she wondered.

'He will corrupt it so that it serves the powers of darkness. Its goodness will be transformed into the most insidious evil.'

She was about to ask after Hasan when the soul-image anticipated her. The huge countenance on the screen clouded with regret.

'Alquazar himself could never take the Rose. He had

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

to find another to do it for him . . . a man of truth and honest purpose . . .'

'Hasan!' she breathed.

'. . . whom he will discard . . . destroy . . . once that person has completed his task.'

Horror and fury made her step right up to the giant mirror. The idea that her step-father was planning to kill Hasan had filled her with hatred and disgust.

'How can you serve such an evil master?' she demanded.

'I am bound to him by a spell that is stronger than death itself, Princess. I have no choice.'

'Is there no way of escape?'

'Yes,' he sighed, struck yet again by the cruel irony of it. 'When he possesses the Flower of Mercy . . . then I shall be free.'

'Then help Hasan!' she yelled. 'Warn him!'

'I can do nothing,' he shrugged.

Zuleira became decisive. Her lover's life was at risk.

'Show me Hasan!'

The Princess had realised how Alquazar had been able to see Hasan arrive on the island of Elil. It had to be by means of the Mirror of the Moon.

'Show me Hasan!' she repeated. 'At once.'

'There is no time, my child. You are in grave danger here.'

'I care nothing for that.' She was as imperious as her step-father. 'I must see him. Now!'

The soul-image bowed and faded from the screen. In a matter of seconds, a new image appeared and it brought joy to Zuleira's heart. She could see Hasan and Khasim scrambling towards the outcrop of rock at the far end of the gorge.

'He is safe!' she exclaimed.

To learn that fact, it had been well worth while to undergo the terrors of the journey to the secret cavern. She moved as close to the giant screen as she could and watched intently.

After a long and arduous trek down the gorge, the two

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

men had at last found the object which had been glinting in the sunlight. Hasan was very disappointed by it and felt quite cheated.

'It was a trick of the sun. This is no sign for us.'

'Does it matter?' grinned Khasim. 'It will come in useful all the same.'

'What possible use can *this* be?'

Hasan rescued the object from the pocket of sand in which it was sunk. It was an antique bottle of curious shape and its highly polished glass had reflected the sun's rays brilliantly.

'An empty bottle is worthless!' complained Hasan.

'But it's still corked, master,' Khasim pointed out, taking it from him and dusting it off with eagerness. 'A full bottle is a blessing to a thirsty traveller.'

He uncorked the bottle, then hurled it away with a yelp as it opened with a rumble of suppressed power.

'What sort of wine is *that*?' he gasped.

The bottle lay in the sand where it had been thrown. From its open neck there emerged a stream of steadily thickening smoke that had a whole variety of hues. An ominous noise accompanied all this, not unlike the rolls of thunder during the storm at sea. The smoke came out faster and faster and swirled about in the air until it began to take the shape of a squat, ugly, legless jinnee. As its form and feaures became more defined and solid, the jinnee stretched its muscled arms and laughed with a voice that boomed and echoed all the way down the gorge.

'Free . . . free . . . free at last!'

Hasan and Khasim shielded their eyes to look up at the giant shape that was towering above them. They flinched as the laugh boomed out again, its vibrations setting off a small landslide above the two men. Rocks fell to within a few feet of them. Hasan was extremely wary but Khasim was more than pleased.

'Master – a jinnee! We've set it free!'

Hearing Khasim, the jinnee stopped laughing and looked down at the minute figures of the two men, puny creatures for whom he had nothing but a scornful leer.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'It seems pleased to meet us,' said Khasim, uncertainly.

The jinnee laughed yet again and grew even more. It bowed low over them and they were caught in its monstrous shadow. There was a mock servility in its tone.

'Yes, I am pleased . . . and grateful.'

Hasan was even more wary now but Khasim's confidence rallied. He saw a chance to put the jinnee's traditional magic to his own use.

'So you should be, O Smoky One!' he rejoined. 'Freedom is a rare and wonderful thing. Now – reward us!'

The creature had now grown to its full height and it glowered down at the tiny figures before it.

'You expect a reward, then?'

'We demand it!' said Khasim, arrogantly.

'Er, we need help, jinnee,' added Hasan, quickly. He tried to be more diplomatic. 'We would be grateful to *you*, then. Our task is to find the Rose of Elil. Will you help us, please?'

'No!' roared the jinnee. 'Never in a thousand years will you take the Flower of Mercy. You must defeat *me* first.'

Khasim was affronted by this and became scathing.

'You ungrateful scum! What sort of thanks is that!' Hasan tried to stop him abusing the jinnee, but Khasim went on regardless. 'Give us what's due to us, miserable wretch! You are our slave! We want our three wishes.'

'Be silent, you speck of insignificance!' bellowed the jinnee and set off another minor landslide further down the gorge. 'I am very grateful,' he growled, 'for you have given me the opportunity to kill you both.'

His booming laugh was so loud this time that they put their hands to their ears to shut it out.

'For that alone, I grant you one last favour . . . a swift and merciful death.'

He pointed a massive finger and directed a thunderbolt straight at them. They raced for cover just in time and it smashed into the ground where they had been

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

standing with terrifying force. Hasan and Khasim crouched behind some rocks but they knew that they had no defence against the malignant spirit.

Zuleira winced as she watched all this in the Mirror of the Moon. Hasan and Khasim were up against fearsome odds and she could see no way that they could survive. The jinnee was like a great mountain above them, beating its bare chest with glee.

'Run, Hasan! Run!'

Even as she cried out, she knew that the advice was futile. The men could never outrun a creature whose shadow stretched half-way down the gorge. Besides, Hasan could not hear her. The jinnee's blood-curdling laughter drowned out any other sound.

Zuleira shuddered as the jinnee pointed its finger to aim a second thunderbolt at its helpless victims.

Once again they dodged the bolt and it exploded with an awesome crack, sending up a shower of rocks and sand. Hasan and Khasim had to duck to avoid the flying debris.

'We can't get past him, master,' quailed Khasim. One hope remained. 'The carpet . . .' It lay rolled up on the ground some distance away where he had dropped it.

'We could never reach it, Khasim.'

When the jinnee had assumed its full shape, it had grown two mighty legs, thick columns that ended in sandalled feet. One stride would get it to the abandoned carpet well before them. Khasim despaired.

'Why doesn't he pick on someone his own size?' he bleated.

'Let's bring him down to our own level,' urged Hasan, valiant as ever in a tight situation.

'How?'

'Like this.' Hasan drew his father's sword. 'Strike at his ankles. Come on!'

He dashed out towards the giant feet, followed with some reluctance by Khasim. Both men slashed and hacked at the creature's ankles but their swords passed

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

straight through and left no mark. They stood there aghast.

'He's made of smoke!' yelled Khasim. 'We can't touch him.'

'Try again,' invited the jinnee, chuckling.

The men gave up and sprinted for cover, Hasan tripping over an exposed rock that sent him sprawling face downwards in the sand.

'You, first,' decided the jinnee.

He raised both hands so that he could send two sizzling thunderbolts down at his quarry. Hasan tried to struggle to his feet but he had hurt his leg in the fall and he now crashed to the ground again in agony. He rolled over so that he could face his death without flinching. The jinnee's chuckle rumbled on. He was clearly going to enjoy obliterating Hasan from the face of the island.

Beside herself with fear, Zuleira tightened both fists and beat them against her thighs. She felt so appallingly helpless. If Hasan had to die, she would much rather be there to perish with him. For it to happen this way – when she could see him but not save him – was unbearable.

Tears trickled down her soft cheeks and her heart ached at the frustration of it all. If only she could do something! Suddenly her tears stopped, her eyes brightened, her heart no longer ached. She had seen something in the magic mirror which had given her a glimmer of hope. All might not yet be lost.

'Hasan! The bottle . . . the jinnee's bottle!'

It was lying in the sand where it had been dropped and it was quite close to the prostrate Hasan.

'Destroy it,' she called. 'Destroy it!'

At first Hasan did not hear, preoccupied as he was with gathering his strength to try and dodge the descending thunderbolts. He turned over on to his front and began to crawl away, dragging his injured leg behind him. Ahead of him, out of reach, was the curious antique bottle which had imprisoned the jinnee.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'The bottle, Hasan . . .'

It was like the voice of a ghost and it echoed inside his head. He half-knew the voice and wondered if he was dreaming.

'The jinnee's bottle . . . smash it!'

It was Zuleira and her words made realisation dawn for him. Diving forward, he grabbed the bottle and held it close. The jinnee let out a furious roar but when Hasan looked up at him the creature's face was contorted with fear. Hands clasped, the jinnee touched his forehead in obeisance.

'No, master! Spare this poor servant of the Rose!'

Hasan got to his feet and held the bottle high, ready to dash it to pieces if there was any sign of treachery.

'If you would have mercy – answer me!'

'Ask what you will. Your humble slave replies.'

'You know what we seek. Where is the Rose?'

The jinnee looked distinctly uncomfortable and said nothing. Hasan was more forceful.

'Where is the Rose?'

'Go bravely, where once there was a heart of fire . . .'

'I did not ask for riddles!' protested Hasan.

'I can say no more, master.' The jinnee whimpered piteously as the prince lifted up the bottle by way of a threat. 'No, no . . . do not destroy me!'

'Then tell us where we may find the Rose.'

'I have told all I can . . . Show mercy, I beg you! Show mercy!'

'The same mercy that you granted us, smokeball,' sneered Khasim, leaping out from the rock behind which he had been sheltering.

He grabbed the bottle from Hasan and hurled it against a boulder. It shattered on impact and there was a weird explosion.

'Aieeeeee!'

The jinnee's screech went up and down the length of the gorge. His smoke-image dissolved into the shape of a huge stone head set in one side of the valley. He scowled down on the two men with malevolence. Khasim stared back at him with distaste.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'He's solid enough now – serves him right.'

'Where once there was a heart of fire . . .' mused Hasan.

'He was playing tricks with us, master.'

'No, the riddle contains a clue . . . if only we can find what it is . . . a heart of fire . . .'

Khasim had no skill in solving riddles and could only stand and wait as Hasan paced up and down, cogitating. He still walked a little tenderly on his injured leg but it had obviously not been seriously damaged.

'Of course!' grinned Hasan, understanding at last. 'It's so simple, really.'

'Is it? Not to me.' Khasim was still lost.

'Where once there was a heart of fire . . . What do you see in the distance, Khasim? Behind those foothills?'

'Ah!' beamed the bodyguard.

'Come, Khasim. That is where we must go to find the Rose.'

And the two men set off in the direction of the extinct volcano that dominated the skyline ahead.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Chapter Nine

When Majeed had tumbled off the magic carpet during the terrible electric storm, Hasan had assumed that it had been an accident. The prince had had no idea that it was a calculated act of attempted murder, instigated by Alquazar back in his cavern. Hasan had mourned the death of his young friend until the sight of the island of Elil distracted him from any thoughts of Majeed, and subsequent events had been so dramatic that he had not had time to pay the boy even the tribute of a passing sigh.

Had he done so, his grief would have been misplaced. Majeed had not in fact perished in the tumult of the storm. After being shoved off the carpet, he had plummeted towards the waves below and turned once more to the sapphire of Al'Adin for help.

'Vahishta . . . save me . . . save me!'

True to her promise, the jinnee princess had interceded for the second time to rescue him, and instead of plunging down into the depths of the sea Majeed had landed on a bank of soft moss. The bump had knocked him unconscious but there were no bones broken. Shakti, frightened but unharmed, had jumped out of his cloth bag and hopped around in front of his young master, jabbering noisily.

While Hasan and Khasim were having their encounter with the jinnee of the bottle, Majeed was enjoying a long and restorative sleep. He now awoke, much to the delight of Shakti, who had thought him dead.

'Where are we, Shakti?'

The monkey was too excited by his master's return to life to offer any sensible guesses.

'How ever did we get here?' asked the boy, sitting up and looking around. 'It's some sort of jungle.'

Shakti celebrated the reunion by leaping on to an overhanging bough and swinging from tree to tree. It

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

was much more fun than trailing across hot deserts or being lashed by a hurricane while perched on a flying carpet. The monkey felt quite at home.

A great roar from somewhere deep inside the jungle changed his mind at once and he jumped back into Majeed's arms. There was a second roar and it was followed by other animal bellows and howls and calls. The volume and intensity of the noise suggested that the whole jungle was alive with wild beasts.

'Let us move on, Shakti.'

Majeed wanted to get out of there as soon as he could and to establish exactly where they were. He set off into the undergrowth as fast as he could.

'This way . . . and stay close.'

Shakti did not need to be told that. He was already seeking the refuge of his cloth pouch as more and more animal cries started to rend the air. There was something uncanny about this jungle. It was dark and hostile and Shakti felt exactly as he had when they had first reached Jadur – they were not wanted.

'What was that!'

Majeed stopped as he saw a sudden movement among the trees. Something went crashing off through the undergrowth and it gave him a real shock. He changed direction and broke into a run but the density of the jungle soon slowed him to a walk. The bushes and branches of trees seemed to be getting thicker all the time and long, matted grass made him stumble more than once.

He saw a tiny clearing up ahead and was grateful to see the sunlight slanting down. Then he noticed something in the shadows beyond the clearing and came to a halt. He was certain that a pair of eyes were staring out from the bushes ahead and when a low, angry snarl came from that area, he altered his direction once again and blundered on. It was like trying to find his way out of some gigantic maze.

Collecting cuts and bruises all the way, Majeed pressed on as best he could, trying to get clear of the menace that seemed to lurk among the trees. When he finally

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

reached open land, he fell to the ground panting. Roars and trumpetings from behind him made him get up again and stagger forward. He wanted to put distance between himself and the dreadful jungle.

'Look what we have found, Shakti!'

Directly above them, rising majestically from the wooded slopes all round it, was a volcano. Because it looked dormant and quite safe, Majeed walked on towards it.

'Allah spare me!' gasped the boy, jumping back.

For a great metallic rumbling had started from somewhere inside the volcano and smoke was gushing out of its mouth to form a curtain of coloured mist around it. Flames began to spout from the volcano and the heat made Majeed draw back even further. Shakti knew better than to stir from his hiding place in the pouch.

'The volcano is erupting!' screamed Majeed, diving behind a rock. 'We shall be killed.'

The noise and the flames got worse and tremors shook the earth. Rocks began to crack, bushes to separate, trees to split and fall. Majeed was convinced that the end of the world had come, so violent were the explosions from the volcano. But there was far worse to come, as he realised when he peeped out from behind his rock. What he saw rising out of the smoke and flame turned his legs to jelly.

'Shakti – look!' he gurgled.

The monkey emerged from the pouch with the utmost caution.

'Am I seeing things . . . or are they really there?'

One glance was enough to send Shakti into a state of total panic. He dropped to the ground and raced around in small circles as if demented. Only with an effort could Majeed himself raise his eyes to the top of the volcano.

There in the distance, half-visible through the red flame, were three gigantic monsters with animal bodies supported by legs that ended in vicious talons, great twisted horns above demonic faces and ugly, flared nostrils that breathed fire. Huge wings grew out of their backs and they unfolded and flapped as if the beasts

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

were about to take off. The talons twitched and sent down a flurry of igneous rock.

Majeed had already faced Achmed and his men. He had experienced the terrors of being thrown from a magic carpet into a maelstrom as well. But this was the most horrific thing yet. The thought of becoming the prey of the monsters sent him groping for his sapphire.

'We will get Vahishta to save us,' he cried, holding up the precious jewel.

But before he could make his wish, the monsters expressed their fury so loudly and with such venom that Shakti quite lost his wits. The monkey grabbed the sapphire from Majeed and raced to safety.

'Shakti . . . Shakti . . . come back!'

Majeed chased after him desperately. The sapphire was the one thing which might save him from the monsters who were threatening to descend upon him and tear him to pieces.

'Shakti, where are you? Where are you?'

He searched desperately among the rocks but the monkey was nowhere to be found. Majeed implored him to come back.

'Please . . . the sapphire . . . please bring it back!'

He ran behind a clump of rocks and then yelled out in fear. There was a yawning pit waiting for him and he was falling into it before he had even realised that it was there. The pit was deep and narrow and cut through sheer rock. Majeed landed with a thud at the bottom of it and was very shaken but he seemed to have escaped with nothing more than a few extra bruises.

Adjusting to this latest disaster, Majeed stared upwards to see if it was possible to climb out of the pit. But its walls were far too steep and slippery for anyone to scale. He would have to find some other way out. He looked around the half-dark of the pit and was about to step forward to explore it when there was a spitting hiss directly in front of him.

A snake had reared up to see what the intrusion was all about. It clearly had little time for visitors and hissed its disapproval as it swayed to and fro. Majeed backed

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

away against the wall and stayed there for several minutes, his eyes transfixed by those of the weaving reptile. Any moment, he felt, the snake would dart forward to bite and its deadly poison would do the rest.

Yet the attack never came and the snake seemed content to keep its victim pinned against the wall, cowering with fright. Majeed then noticed an opening in the far wall of the pit, just big enough to admit someone of his diminutive size. He began to inch his way towards this opening but the snake swayed and bobbed in his path. Reaching down, he picked up a twig on the floor of the pit and threw it towards the hissing creature. The snake was distracted long enough for him to make a jump towards the opening and Majeed squeezed through it.

He was in a long tunnel that twisted its way through the rock. No sooner had he taken his first tentative steps along it than there was a mighty, sustained rumbling sound which set off a miniature earthquake. Thin, jagged lines appeared in the roof of the tunnel and several chunks of rock rained down on him. Majeed held up his arms to protect himself and coughed in the cloud of dust that was set up.

Evidently he was directly beneath the volcano and it was starting to erupt again. The noise was ear-shattering but not clearly identifiable. It was a mixture of roar and gush and sizzle but there was something else there, too – an odd whirring sound and an almost mechanical clanking. Majeed could not separate these elements of the noise. To his terrified ear it sounded as if the whole volcano was about to burst into tiny fragments, taking him with it.

Heat was increasing all the time in the tunnel and he mopped his brow, flinching as he did so from the surge of fiery light that suddenly flared up at the end of the passageway. Yet something drew him on, braving the temperature, ignoring the implications of the insistent rumble. Up ahead, he believed, was the very heart of the volcano and he crept towards it until he reached a crevice in the rock. Pungent smoke and blasts of naked flame were coming through the crevice and the heat was

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

blistering. Nevertheless, he got as close as he dared, then knelt down to peer through the crevice.

'It isn't a volcano!' he cried. 'It's a nest of demons!'

What he had glimpsed through the opening were the three deformed monsters, surrounded by fire as they rested in their lair. They seemed to be ready to spring into action, to leap up once more through the mouth of the volcano. Majeed was petrified at the sight of the gruesome creatures who guarded the volcano.

'The sapphire, Shakti!' he called, inwardly. 'The magic jewel . . .'

The belching smoke around the crevice cleared somewhat and he had a better view of the trio of monsters. His gaze ran along the great misshapen back of the first and then it stopped dead. Majeed blinked.

'I must be dreaming!'

In the beast's flank was a small metal door that stood open to reveal a furnace. This was being stoked up by a ragged but sturdy man who was dressed like a blacksmith. Majeed was astounded. What he had taken for fabled beasts were really no more than so much metal. The fire from their nostrils was provided by the quirky character who was now fussing about inside the hollow body of one of the monsters.

'They're not real,' smiled Majeed, admiringly. 'They're metal puppets! But who is the strange one who feeds their flames?'

The man was Daad-el-Shur, the blacksmith of Elil, and he was obsessed with his contraptions to the point of solemn lunacy. He stepped down from the one machine and slammed the furnace door behind him. A fond look came into his eye and he patted the metal flank as an owner might pat a favourite horse. When it touched the hot metal, his hand was retracted hastily.

Daad-el-Shur now hobbled away to a bank of levers on one side of the cavern at the centre of the volcano. Spitting on his hands, he strained to haul on one of the big levers and needed all his strength to shift it.

'Levers? But why?' wondered Majeed, entranced.

He got an immediate answer. Gears started to mesh

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

and an engine began to engage, bringing about a vast increase in the noise and hence the vibration that was caused. The blacksmith had his back to Majeed and the latter took the chance to dash through the smoke-filled crevice and across to one of the monsters. Brushing against the flank, he recoiled from the searing heat.

'A furnace?' He was intrigued.

Moving around under the belly of the huge demon, he looked for some clue as to the exact operation of the machine. He was no potential victim of three monsters now: he was a typical boy, overwhelmed with curiosity about a remarkable toy.

He found a twisted metal staircase that led upwards into the bowels of the creature. What stopped him going up it was the grinding noise that came from the machine, almost deafening in its intensity and pitch. Daad-el-Shur heard the grating as well and turned to investigate.

'Ah! Thick as a rusty anvil, I am,' he mumbled, slapping his thigh in annoyance. 'I ought to know that the safety-catch is still on – after all, I put it there.'

Muttering to himself, he headed straight towards Majeed and the boy's only exit was upwards. He scurried up the steps and entered the monster as the blacksmith arrived. Daad-el-Shur, keeping up a crazy conversation with himself all the while, heaved on two metal ratchets and allowed the engine to run at full throttle. He ran back to his controls with a chuckle of satisfaction.

Inside the monster Majeed climbed higher and higher to escape the ferocity of the heat. All round the interior were pipes and ducts that carried the smoke and flame towards the demon's head. Majeed was trying to sort out the purpose of all this when the whole machine gave a tremendous lurch and a hiss of steam escaped near him. The engine clanked into top gear now and produced greater shuddering than ever, forcing Majeed to cling on to the stair-rail for his life.

'Vahishta – where are you now? he called.

What was even more alarming than the strident voice of an engine going at top speed was the shriek of rage

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

that came from the head of the monster and rang out through its metal interior.

'Vahishta – Vahishta – *please* . . .'

Down at his control panel, Daad-el-Shur was roaring into a tube to produce the fearsome noises. Smoke made him cough and splutter and he broke off to clear his throat, giggling at his performance like a child. Reaching for another lever, he gave a pull and sheets of flame shot up from around the base of the first demon. Like a colossal bird that is monarch of the whole sky, it began to rise with grace and majesty.

'Allah protect me – does it *fly*?' cried Majeed.

The surge of energy that lifted the monster upwards in a slow ascent had been accompanied by an increase in the booming and hissing and clanking. More bellows of rage came from the head. A distinct change in the quality of the noise told Majeed that they had left the crater and were rising up through the mouth of the volcano into the air.

They were thrusting their way through brittle branches when they saw it. For once, Khasim's knowing chuckle died away.

'Master – up there . . . is it a dragon?'

'Be brave, Khasim!'

Hasan stood his ground and looked up at the monster as it spewed out its fire. Here was a challenge even greater than that posed by the jinnee of the bottle but the prince did not turn and flee. That course of action, however, appealed to Khasim a lot.

'Let's run, master!' he counselled.

'Against men of flesh and blood – any time. But this is a demon from hell itself.'

A thunderous rumble from inside the volcano announced the arrival of two more enraged beasts, who glared down from their eminence with hungry and vindictive eyes.

'Three demons!' wailed Khasim. 'It's hopeless, master. Hopeless!'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Hasan was interested by the appearance of two more monsters and did not flinch before their roarings.

'What secret does this place hold that it takes *three* demons to guard it?' he asked.

'I don't care! Let them keep it!'

Khasim took to his heels and scrambled back down through the scrub. He had lost all interest in the Rose of Elil.

'Come back!' cried Hasan, racing after him.

Neither of them realised that it was one solitary human being – the eccentric Daad-el-Shur – who controlled the movements and roars of the three monsters. Nor did they know that Majeed was high inside one of the repulsive creatures and had indeed made his way right to the head. He now stood on a balustrade formed by the metallic teeth and stared out through the mouth on to open terrain.

'Hasan!' he gasped, spotting his friend haring down the incline. Cupping his hands, he shouted for all he was worth. 'Hasan! Can you hear me?'

Hasan was still pursuing his so-called bodyguard. With a leap, he brought Khasim to the ground and pinned him there, trying to talk some courage into the man. He stopped abruptly as he heard a high, wailing voice that seemed to come from one of the demons itself.

'Hasan! . . . Khasim!'

'It knows us by name . . . Master – we are doomed!'

'*Listen*, Khasim!' said Hasan, irritably.

Away in the distance, Majeed separated each word so that it had a better chance of being heard.

'Do . . . not . . . be . . . afraid! . . . This . . . is . . . Majeed!'

Hasan was thrilled but Khasim was deeply suspicious, certain that it was all part of some elaborate trick. Daad-el-Shur reacted in a very different way when he heard the voice coming back down the tube at him.

'Majeed *alive*?' He glowered and reached for a massive spanner. 'We will soon see about that.'

Boyish, bubbling laughter was coming from the mouth of the demon now and Hasan recognised it as Majeed's.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'There is nothing to fear!' yelled the boy. 'The demons of the volcano are machines.'

'Machines?' Khasim furrowed his brow.

'They cannot hurt you!' assured Majeed.

'This is no trick, Khasim,' decided the prince. 'Our friend, Majeed, lives. Let us go to him.'

Swords in hand and spirits lifted, they went back up the hill and into the smoke that was curling around the mouth of the volcano.

'That boy has enough lives to keep a cat happy,' observed Khasim, and he dodged a flame-spout.

'Up here . . . up here!' directed Majeed from his vantage point in the mouth of the foremost monster. 'I'm here!'

'So I see!' noted a voice below him.

He looked down to see the blacksmith, slightly puffed, making his way up the remaining steps to the demon's head. Daad-el-Shur brandished his spanner in a way that showed he meant to use it. Majeed prepared to dodge but he was in a tricky position, up against the spiked teeth of the monster. The blacksmith hobbled towards him, chuntering away.

'Interfering . . . spoiling my effects . . . you're going to pay for this, Majeed.'

'I did no harm.'

'I guard this place,' said the other, stalking him. 'You're an intruder . . . not wanted . . .'

He swung the spanner but the boy eluded it with ease and it hit the metal floor with a clang. Daad-el-Shur shuffled after Majeed in an almost comic manner.

'Come here . . . nobody touches my machines.'

'But we need the Rose of Elil! It's a matter of life and death!'

'They all say that,' came the sour reply. 'Thieves . . . sorcerers . . .'

He struck at Majeed again and the boy skipped out of his way, swinging round on him with indignation.

'I'm not a thief – or a magician!'

'Nobody steals the Rose while I guard it!'

Daad-el-Shur rushed forward and Majeed tried to

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

swerve past him. This time he slipped on the shiny floor and fell right at the blacksmith's feet. The latter raised his weapon to strike but felt some remorse at the fact that it was only a boy who was lying there.

'This will hurt me as well,' he confessed, sadly.

His strong right arm brought the spanner swishing through the air but it made contact with one of the demon's teeth instead of with Majeed. Uprooted from its metal gum, the tooth fell heavily down on to the blacksmith's head and he was knocked senseless. As he slumped to the floor, Majeed leapt up and put a foot on the chest of his adversary, striking a pose of triumph.

Hasan and Khasim came clattering up the steps to save him and were rather disappointed to find that the fight was over. Majeed beamed at them.

'Must I do all the work myself?' he joked.

Hasan took him by the shoulders and greeted him warmly.

'It's good to see you alive and well, Majeed. We thought you were dead.'

'Yes,' laughed Khasim. 'How on earth did you survive that storm, cockroach?'

Majeed did not want to get involved in awkward explanations about the sapphire and its magic powers, nor did he want to be reminded that he had lost the jewel and his monkey.

'That's not important,' he said, dismissively. He pointed down at Daad-el-Shur who was snoring happily. 'The crooked one is the Keeper of the Rose.'

'The Flower of Mercy?' Hasan was delighted.

Khasim's joviality vanished and he became stern and practical.

'We must wake him up, then . . . and ask him some questions . . .'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Chapter Ten

While Khasim was waiting to interrogate the blacksmith on the island of Elil, his agents had been asking many questions back in Jadur. A whole network of spies served Alquazar and they presented information daily so that their master knew exactly what was happening in the city. It was clear from reports that had come in that the spirit of revolt had not been entirely crushed. There was still considerable unrest among the people and there were still those who were ready to organise that unrest.

'I said it was madness,' argued old Asaf.

'You *always* say that,' complained the fiery Mahmoud.

'We were unlucky, that is all,' decided Abu.

They were in the carpet shop, speaking in undertones and trying to disguise the nature of their talk by pretending to appraise some Turkish carpets. Asaf remembered only too well how their attempted rebellion had been snuffed out.

'We cannot fight sorcery, Abu.'

'We must,' retorted his friend. 'Somehow – we must.'

'He has eyes everywhere,' muttered Asaf, 'and knows our very thoughts.'

'I would love to put some of those eyes out,' confessed Mahmoud, grimly. 'Death to all spies.'

'Shh!' Asaf was a bundle of nerves, as usual.

'So what do we do, Abu?' asked the youngest of the rebels. 'Grin and bear it? Alquazar has ground us down far too long.'

'We must bide our time, Mahmoud. We must build up our strength again and wait for the right moment. Meanwhile – yes, we must seem to grin and bear it.'

'Nothing else we can do,' sighed the old man.

'There is – strike back now!'

'Too soon, Mahmoud. Far too soon.'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'They will not expect us to have recovered from that last raid,' said Mahmoud to his leader. 'We need better weapons, though.'

'We will get them – in time.' Abu was quietly certain.

'And then we attack!'

'Madness, madness . . . I still say it'll be madness.'

Abu sensed that someone was listening and, raising his voice, he drew his colleagues aside.

'And this is one of the finest carpets in Arabia. You have only to touch it to feel its quality . . .'

An hour later, the gist of their conversation had been reported to Alquazar. The caliph had a word with his guard commander.

Overjoyed that Hasan was safe and unharmed, Zuleira quite forgot where she was and how she had got there. She suffered a sudden return to reality when the image on the screen faded and the impassive face of her step-father's double came up in its place.

'Go away!' she ordered.

'You have watched long enough, Princess.'

'Go away! I only want to see Hasan.'

'But you know he is safe,' reasoned the soul-image.

'He may still need my help,' she claimed. 'I helped him to defeat the jinnee from the bottle. He would not have done that without me.'

The soul-image smiled at her desperate concern for her betrothed but he had genuine fears for her own safety now.

'Forget Hasan for the moment.'

'I must be with him. And I can be – through the Mirror of the Moon.' Her lips pouted. 'Let me see him again.'

'He is waiting for the blacksmith of Elil to awake from his slumbers, Princess.'

'Show me.'

'You must not stay here,' urged the soul-image. 'If Caliph Alquazar discovers you here – there will be no mercy.'

'I am his step-daughter,' she countered.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'You have gone beyond the forbidden door and entered his secret cavern. He will treat you as he would any other intruder.'

'I do not care,' she said, defiantly.

'But, Princess—'

'I care only for Hasan.' Her head tilted to one side and she pleaded as hard as she could. 'Please, please . . . for the sake of the love between us, let me see Hasan again.'

The soul-image was about to advise her to leave at once but it changed its mind and bowed its head gently before vanishing from sight. On to the crystalline screen came the image of Hasan once more, still waiting inside the demon's head for Daad-el-Shur to open his eyes. The prince looked happy and unworried and was joking with his companions.

Zuleira tried to reach out and touch him.

'Hasan . . . my own true love . . . come back soon, very soon . . .'

'Did you carry out my orders, Bahloul?'

'To the letter.'

'Good. I want all the details. Especially the number of deaths.'

'Only one, unfortunately, Caliph.'

'Is that *all*?' Alquazar was disgusted.

'There were three badly wounded,' said Bahloul, brightening. 'And several had a sound beating.'

'Good. They must learn the folly of trying to resist me.'

'They have done, master.'

Alquazar and the guard commander were on the balcony outside the throne room. Far below them was the city which they kept in subjection and which was still reeling from the latest blows. The caliph's tryanny needed to be enforced and Bahloul had done just that. Acting on orders, he and his men had carried out a savage raid on the property of known rebels.

Shops had been forcibly entered, goods had been damaged out of sheer spite, random searches had been

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

made, people had been interrogated. Bahloul's crack troops had swooped down on Jadur like hawks and the rebels were caught completely off their guard. One of them, a young hothead, had tried to fight back, stabbing a soldier with a carving knife. The rebel, a mere teenager, had been run through by Bahloul's sword, which had gone on to maim someone who tried to protest at the killing.

Beatings, destruction of property and threats of imprisonment or worse had left the rebel ranks thinned and cowed. The spirit of revolt that had begun to grow once again had now been trodden into the dust. Abu the carpet seller had been on the list for a visit from the soldiers and his shop had been thoroughly knocked about. What he had recently described as 'one of the finest carpets in Arabia' had been rolled up and taken away as part of the spoils.

'You have done well, Bahloul,' complimented Alquazar, when he had listened to all this. 'Just as well,' he added, more sternly.

'Uh . . . yes, master.'

Bahloul had already been upbraided for his incautious remark to the princess about the fate of Hasan. He was still smarting from what Alquazar had said to him and was glad to be able to report good news and gain some approval. He bowed stiffly.

'All Jadur has been taught who rules over the city.'

'I do!' boasted the caliph.

'You are lord of all you survey, master.'

'When I have the Rose of Elil . . . I shall be emperor of the whole world. Think of that, Bahloul!'

He laughed loudly and the guard commander picked up his laugh. When the Flower of Mercy was taken, Hasan would be murdered in cold blood and that pleased Bahloul very much. It was a way of getting back at Zuleira.

Zuleira, meanwhile, was still absorbed by what she saw in the magic mirror – the sight of Hasan with the others,

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

waiting as Daad-el-Shur, blacksmith of Elil, began to surface from his sleep.

'Oh!'

The picture had gone and the face of the soul-image had taken its place. Startled by the sudden transformation, she jumped back. Zuleira had still not entirely got used to the notion that this man in the mirror was not in fact her step-father. The likeness was so incredible and the voice identical. But whereas Alquazar always wore black, the soul-image was robed in white and had a white turban.

'Show me Hasan again, please.'

'My master approaches, Princess. Leave now while you can.'

'I am not afraid to meet him,' she replied, bravely.

'You must get out of here,' urged the soul-image.

'I shall stand up to him,' Zuleira announced. 'Yes, I shall demand to be told the truth!'

'Defy him and he will kill you,' came the solemn warning.

Even after all the distressing things she had learned about Alquazar, she could not believe him capable of this.

'I am his step-daughter. However evil he is, he must still love me . . . must he not?'

'No.'

'He could never hurt *me* . . . could he?'

There was doubt in her mind now and it swelled as she stared at the sad expression before her. The soul-image was on her side and wanted to help her all it could. It would not deceive her.

'Once he has the Rose, he will be all-powerful. Life and love will have no meaning for him then. Flee, Zuleira!'

Her nerve failed and she began to panic. A man who could plot the murder of Hasan could as easily destroy his step-daughter. She ran around the cavern in terror, looking for the way out.

'Where do I go? she cried. 'Where do I go?'

'That way.' The soul-image indicated the shaft

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

between the two stone heads. 'It is the only exit for you.'

Zuleira dashed to it at once, only to draw back when she saw the apparently bottomless shaft that sank away from her.

'Take that way to safety,' advised the soul-image.

'But *how*?'

'Draw your cloak about you and step forward into the darkness.'

'But I will fall!'

'Trust me, Princess. You will come to no harm . . .'

Zuleira hesitated on the brink and looked down into the great, unwelcoming, black void. What could possibly stop her from hurtling to her death? Yet somehow she had ascended that same shaft – there had to be a way down.

'Trust me, Zuleira. I am your friend.'

There were qualities in the voice that she had never heard in that of the real Alquazar – warmth, sincerity, affection. Putting her faith in what she had been told, she pulled her cloak about her and stepped out into thin air. Slowly, she began to float downwards.

'It works!' she exclaimed, with relief.

'Goodbye . . . and may good fortune attend you . . .'

The mirror cleared and the light darkened as the flames in the alcoves guttered into puffs of smoke.

Alquazar was indeed heading for his secret cavern. Anxious to get hold of the Rose of Elil as soon as possible, he fretted at the delay and wondered what had caused it, deciding in the end to return to the Mirror of the Moon so that he could see exactly what was going on. The Flower of Mercy should have been plucked long before this.

'Stand aside!'

The guards jumped aside and bowed as he swept past them with a haughty dignity. He turned into a moated corridor and walked down the long, decorated marble path that led between tranquil, flower-covered waters.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

This was one of the most beautiful features of the palace but he was too busy even to spare it a glance.

'Aside!'

More guards made way for him as he entered the main lobby and strode towards the stairs. The doors of the throne room opened wide and he went through them without even noticing the cringing bows of the giant Nubian mutes. He made straight for the entrance to his secret domain and whispered the magic word.

'Alquazar . . .'

The strange door obeyed the command and he was admitted to the tunnel. He was surprised to hear the violent bubbling of lava ahead of him and moved forward towards the brink to establish the cause.

Zuleira, meanwhile, was on the other side of the pool, terrified by the way that it was hissing and heaving. The lava had been quite placid when she had set her foot on the bridge but then it had become a cauldron of flame and noise, sending her reeling back against the wall of the shaft she had just descended, and pinning her there with its fierce heat.

The bridge was her only means of escape. Either she must try to run through the wall of living fire or she would be caught by her step-father and suffer an even worse fate. Calling on all her courage and determination, she began to inch towards the bridge in readiness for a dash across it but she did not get very far.

Walking straight towards her through the flames, oblivious to their roar and their hungry lick, was Alquazar, caliph of Jadur, sorcerer supreme, tyrant.

'Step-father . . .'

But he did not recognise any tie between them. His face was a portrait of implacable rage and his eyes pierced her like hot needles.

'You have trespassed . . . and you shall be punished . . .'

'Come on – wake up!' ordered Khasim, shaking the blacksmith.

'Mmm? What? Eh? Oh!'

Daad-el-Shur massaged his skull and looked around

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

him. He had been carried down to the floor of the crater and was lying among hammers, anvils, metal wheels, axles, spindles, chains and all the other bric-à-brac of his workshop. Questions assailed him.

'Where is it?'

'How do we get there?'

'Why did you try to kill me?'

'Who are you?'

'When did you make those demons?'

The blacksmith sat up and scratched an itch in his curly white beard. He was in no way alarmed by the predicament he was in.

'Tell us!' snarled Khasim, placing his sword at the man's throat.

'Where will we find the Rose of Elil?' asked Hasan.

Daad-el-Shur rolled his eyes and grinned slyly.

'The Rose is there – behind that door,' he said, pointing. Khasim sprang over to the wall of the crater. 'Open it,' he chuckled, as Khasim started to heave and pant, 'if you can . . .'

'Let me try,' offered Hasan, but even his strength could not move the door in the rock. He and Khasim advanced on the blacksmith. 'We do not like jokes, friend . . .'

'But it's easy, master,' laughed Majeed.

He had simply turned the handle of the door and it had opened slowly to admit a shaft of silvery light. Beyond the door was the famous Garden of Elil and it beckoned to them with a choir of sad, haunting voices. Daad-el-Shur was still chuckling as the three of them went on through.

Alquazar watched all this in the Mirror of the Moon and Zuleira stood beside him, glaring at him with hatred and revulsion. He was her step-father no longer and she saw him now in his true incarnation as the Caliph of Darkness.

'It will be part of your punishment,' he warned.

'I am not afraid of you!' she cried. 'A dealer in sorcery and lies!'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'You have no conception of my power, Zuleira. But when I have the Rose . . .' He made her look up at the mirror. 'I will let you live . . . long enough to see my moment of victory!'

Alquazar gloated over the prize that would soon be his as the magical Rose itself filled the screen with its beauty. Zuleira thought only of Hasan's imminent death and found it a torture to go on looking into the Mirror of the Moon.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Chapter Eleven

The Garden of Elil was an eerie and unlovely place. It was not really a garden at all because it had been formed by hardened lava and it supported virtually no growth. Weird, twisted shapes, which might once have been trees, stood all around in grotesque postures. Lava-encrusted thorns seemed to be everywhere, their spikes ready to gash and wound. A light breeze blew but it brought no fresh air. Instead there was a faint smell of death.

In the centre of the garden was a large, misted pool of slime. At the heart of this was a single rock and it was on this that the Rose of Elil, a solitary budding flower formed of crystal and pulsating with light, grew in lone splendour. Its forbidding and lifeless surroundings only served to enhance its exquisite beauty, though its fragrance could not be enjoyed through the stench.

Hasan, Khasim and Majeed picked their way with care towards the pool and assessed the problem. The central rock was well out of reach and there seemed to be no way of getting to the Rose except by balancing on a dead bough that arched low over the pool. On the surface of the water was a sickly crust of scum that gave off a foul smell. The haunting siren voices rose and fell, adding a piteous note of mourning to the garden.

'We can never get across there,' said Khasim.

'It looks impossible . . . but we must try . . .'

'To take that Rose . . . a man must risk the impossible,' observed Majeed, entranced by the sight of the single, glowing flower.

'No wonder that blacksmith laughed at us,' muttered Khasim, ruefully. 'He knew what we'd find.'

'There has to be a way, Khasim,' insisted Hasan.

'Straight into that stinking pool!' replied the other.

'Just look at the Rose, master!' urged Majeed. 'It's beautiful!'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Not even the sight of the magic flower could prevent Alquazar from being annoyed with Khasim. He had ordered the man to dispose of Majeed during the storm, yet the boy patently lived.

'You useless, mindless, worthless toad, Khasim!' he cursed.

'The Flower of Mercy can never be yours,' Zuleira blurted out. 'You are too evil!'

'I *must* have it!' came the hoarse whisper. 'I must!'

Zuleira tried desperately to safeguard Hasan and to persuade the caliph that he had to be spared.

'You need Hasan. Without him – you fail!'

'Once he has plucked the Rose, I shall need him no longer . . .'

'But he has to return to Jadur,' she begged, 'to bring back the Flower of Mercy to you.'

'He will never return. I have seen to that.'

Despair now settled on her features as she turned back to the crystalline screen.

Hasan was attempting to reach the Rose by walking along the frail-looking bough. It was a precarious route to the rock but it was the only one that presented itself. As the bough took Hasan's weight it dipped right down to touch the surface of the swamp. The ghostly voices began to sing their dirge once more and through the crust of the pool a number of hands reached up and tried to clutch at Hasan's ankles. It needed all his skill and sense of balance to prevent himself from being hauled into the water.

'Take care!' gasped Khasim.

The clutching hands seemed to be made of stone. Through the openings they had created in the surface noxious vapours now began to rise.

'Come back, Hasan!' advised Majeed, coughing.

Hasan returned to the comparative safety of the lava bank. The hands sank beneath the surface of the reeking pool.

'Strange voices . . . dead hands . . . I do not like this

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

place,' decided Khasim, holding an arm up to his mouth to ward off the fumes.

'The voices and hands belonged to men, once,' said Hasan. 'Other seekers after the Rose . . . who failed.'

'This poison would turn a man's heart to stone,' spluttered the portly bodyguard.

'I can never get across, Khasim. I am too heavy. So are you.'

'But the boy could try!' Khasim's inspiration did not please Majeed at all. 'You might make it, cockroach!'

As Majeed viewed the dangerous swamp, something swung down from the stark branches of one of the tree-forms and landed on his head.

'Shakti!' He hugged the monkey to him. 'Where have you been?'

'What use is that creature?' sneered Khasim.

'But he has brought the sapphire back – look.'

'Sapphire?' Khasim's eyes almost left his head as they settled on the sapphire of Al'Adin.

Before he could reach out for the jewel, Khasim saw the boy dance towards the rim of the pool with a new confidence, Majeed stepped on to the bough that stretched across towards the Rose.

'No problem,' he said, cheekily. 'I'll do the work – as usual.'

'Take care, Majeed,' warned Hasan, as the hands emerged again.

'Shakti has returned – it is a sign. I know I shall be all right.' He moved slowly along the bough. 'I am not afraid now.'

The slime-covered hands reached up and tried to grab his thin little legs. Although his weight did not bring the bow low enough for them to get a proper hold, the grasping fingers of the long-dead nevertheless brushed against his feet. It sent a chill through him and he turned towards the rock for help.

'Rose of Elil, I come to you with an open heart,' he pleaded. 'Do not turn me away.'

As if in response to his appeal, the flower began to shine with greater radiance and the keening voices were

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

now lifted in a chant of hope. Instead of trying to pull him down, the hands now drew back in flowing gestures, leaving an avenue along which he could pass with impunity.

Khasim goggled; Hasan smiled in triumph; and Majeed advanced towards the Flower of Mercy with a sense of importance and elation.

While Zuleira had watched all this with an uneasy fascination, Alquazar frowned and blamed himself for not understanding one cardinal point.

'It is the boy who holds my fate in his hands . . . not Hasan!'

Unaccustomed to being wrong and to making mistakes of such significance, Alquazar stared at the magic mirror with discomfort. He felt that what was happening was out of his control. His plans might yet founder.

Majeed inched towards the rock with care and Hasan urged him on with words of encouragement. Neither of them saw the wily Khasim unroll the magic carpet which he had been carrying. Nor did they see him grip his sword more tightly and hold it at the ready. Khasim was still under orders and he intended to carry them out.

When he had at last clambered on to the rock, Majeed bent down to examine the flower and to inhale the scent that was now filling the whole garden. Hand raised above the stem, he paused to make an apology.

'Rose of Elil . . . forgive me . . . our need is great.'

He took it gently from where it grew and held it aloft. Instantly, a metamorphosis took place. The garden was transformed from a place of death and misery to one of life and happiness.

'Look!' yelled Majeed.

The rock on which he was standing had become a grassy knoll with herbs and flowers all over it. It was set in the middle of a fragrant sunlit pool. Where the petrified hands of warriors had once thrust up through slime, lilies and other delicate water flowers now

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

abounded. The lava became banks of long grass and the spiky thorns gave way to hosts of blooming orchids, tulips and roses. Trees returned to life and swayed in the sweet, airy breeze whose soft whisper had replaced the siren calls of sadness.

'Amazing!' gaped Khasim.

'Truly a garden of paradise!' admired Hasan. 'Thanks to Majeed.'

Using a series of lily pads as stepping stones, the boy made his way back to them and handed the Flower of Mercy to his friend. Hasan's gratitude was reward enough and he grinned at his master. Forgetting himself, even Khasim gave the boy a paternal pat.

'*Now*, Khasim. Now!'

Alquazar's command rang in his ear and he did not hesitate.

'Hasan! Beware!'

Whether or not he heard Zuleira's screamed warning, Hasan had no time to act on it. Khasim cut him down from behind with a vicious swipe of his sword, grabbing the Rose as the prince fell.

'You've killed him!' wept Majeed.

'That'll be no disappointment to Alquazar,' quipped Khasim. 'It will save him the price of a wedding.' He turned around and snapped out an order. 'Carpet!'

The magic carpet rose a foot or so from the ground and hovered there as he climbed on to it. He sniffed the Flower of Mercy and smiled his thanks at Majeed.

Back in the secret cavern, Alquazar was as near to showing genuine happiness as he was able. Clenching his fist in a victory salute, he gestured the image in the mirror away. He had at last achieved the dream which had sustained him for so long. He had no sympathy for Zuleira, who had collapsed to the floor and was bewailing the death of Hasan.

'Stay here and weep, my child. I go to meet Khasim on his return . . . and to accept the talisman!'

He marched off towards the shaft and was about to descend when another thought came into his mind.

CC-0. Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Looking at his step-daughter through eyes of fire, he let his own dark wish be known to her for the first time.

'Once I have the Magic Rose, I will make you lose all memory of this, Zuleira. You, too, will be my slave.'

More tears welled up and ran down her wet cheeks as she dimly understood what he meant. Before she could protest or beg for mercy, he had vanished down into the black depths of the shaft. Her cup of despair was full. Hasan was dead and her own step-father was now a threat to her virtue.

'Hold fast to your love, Princess . . .'

The soul-image had appeared once more in the mirror and its aspect was no longer disturbingly like Alquazar's. There was a gentleness in its gaze and a warmth in its manner that gave some comfort to the kneeling girl.

'. . . the Rose is not yet in the sorcerer's evil hand.'

'But it is only a matter of time,' she said, defeated.

'Regard this mirror . . . and have faith . . .'

The soul-image faded away and Khasim appeared once more on the screen. He was standing on the magic carpet, holding Majeed at bay with the point of his sword.

'The carpet travels much better with only one passenger, cockroach.'

'You murdered my friend,' blubbered the boy.

'*He* doesn't know that,' beamed Khasim.

'How can you joke at his death? Have you no heart?'

'An assassin must have a sense of humour, sprat! What fun would life be otherwise?'

He let out his great mocking laugh, the one that Majeed had first heard directed at him in the market place of Jadur. The carpet began to lift and was clearly setting off on its return journey. It was the moment that the boy had been waiting for and he acted swiftly. Pulling Shakti to him by the monkey's lead, he passed on his command.

'Shakti – bring me the Rose!'

Then he threw the monkey straight at Khasim's face.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

The latter ducked in fright and dropped his sword. With supreme natural agility, Shakti rebounded off the man's gross body, snatched the Rose of Elil from his podgy grasp and, jabbering loudly, landed back at Majeed's feet.

'Well done, Shakti!'

Khasim did not endorse this praise. Crouching on all fours, he tried to wrench the carpet around from its pre-ordained course.

'Back, carpet! Back!' he howled, beating on it with his fists.

But the carpet went speeding off to its destination, climbing high into the sky so that Khasim's last words were no more than a distant echo in the heavens.

'I dare not return to Alquazar without the talisman . . . I dare not . . .'

Majeed watched him go and gave a mock wave of farewell.

'Let's see him laugh his way out of *that*, Shakti!'

The two friends now turned their full attention to Hasan, whose inert body lay in the long grass. Majeed believed that there was one possible chance of bringing him back to life. He took out the sapphire and studied it gravely.

'I have one more life, Vahishta. Help me – save Hasan!'

The jinnee princess appeared once more in the heart of the jewel but her face was serious and full of regret.

'My gift of life was for you alone.'

'You refuse me?' he stuttered, hurt and dismayed.

'Why do you ask me to save the life of your friend, Majeed?'

'My friend is a brave man!' argued the boy. 'He is a prince of royal blood. Is he not worth ten of me?'

Her expression softened at this and she nodded her appreciation of his little speech.

'Your love for him has won my help,' she smiled. 'But you have a stronger power than mine already in your hand.'

'The Rose of Elil . . . what can it do?'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'Many things,' said Vahishta. 'When Hasan wakes, ask the Rose to take you from this enchanted isle.'

'But how will he wake?' wondered the boy.

'Touch the sapphire to his lips.'

He was enraptured by her beauty and brought the jewel up to his own lips to honour it with a kiss.

'You are my guardian angel, Vahishta. I obey.'

He took the sapphire and let it touch the cold lips of the dead man, trusting in its power to work a third miracle.

Zuleira was on tenterhooks as she watched the results of all this. At first, the jewel seemed to have no effect on the supine figure, then there was a slight twitch of the limbs, followed by a flicker of the eyelids, followed by a distinct movement of the hand.

'Hasan!' she cried out in an ecstasy of relief and joy.

So rapt was her attention that she did not notice the smoke that was beginning to rise about her. When he had reached the bridge, the sorcerer had made sure that Zuleira would have no means of escape from his cavern. He had tossed a potion into the lava and it had bubbled up with greater intensity than ever, sending up gigantic flames which had found their way into the connecting shaft. Behind the now delighted Zuleira, therefore, was the start of an inferno.

'You live, Hasan . . . my true love, you live!'

Hasan opened his eyes to find Shakti giving him a round of applause. He sat up and tried to gather his hazy thoughts, not at all certain of where he was or what had happened. The sight of the garden filled him with astonishment and Majeed had to explain.

'The Garden of Elil, master.'

'Have I been sleeping?'

'You could say that!'

'Where is Khasim?'

'He betrayed us, master.' Majeed grew bitter. 'He tried to kill you.'

Hasan was on his feet at once, his sword at the ready,

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

to defend himself against the treacherous bodyguard. Majeed shook his head.

'He is not here any more. Khasim has gone back to his true master – Caliph Alquazar. He took the magic carpet.'

'Then we are trapped on this island – for ever!'

His dismay was total. He had only undertaken the perilous quest in order to win the hand of the Princess Zuleira and now he would be apart from her for the rest of his days. Majeed crouched down beside him and whispered in his ear.

'We have the Rose of Elil, master.'

'What?' He sounded dazed.

'Take it in your hand . . . go on, take it.'

Hasan let the stem of the Rose be placed in his fingers and he looked down at the glowing flower.

'How can it help us, Majeed?'

'Close your eyes . . . and trust me.'

The prince was very sceptical about this suggestion but Majeed's obvious sincerity made him go along with it. He closed his eyes and felt the boy's hands upon the Rose as well.

'Rose of Elil – in the name of all things good and true, take us back to Jadur!'

Shakti leapt into his pouch only just in time, for Majeed and Hasan suddenly vanished from the garden in a flash. Next moment, all three of them – man, boy, monkey – were sitting on a pile of carpets in some sort of shop. It was quite dark and rather chilly and the faint buzz of distant voices could be heard. The place was a far cry from the island of Elil, with its jinnee of the bottle and its mechanical demons and its Garden of the Dead. Hasan put words to the thoughts of them all.

'Where in the name of Allah are we *now*?'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Chapter Twelve

Alquazar stayed in the tunnel long enough to be sure that Zuleira's only exit had been sealed off. The lava was now seething and a fire was raging for all it was worth. No human being could get near the bridge, let alone cross it. Only the sorcerer himself could withstand the fury of such a blaze. Zuleira, small, defenceless, mortal, was now a prisoner in the secret cavern. Alquazar felt that it was fit treatment for someone who had dared to venture into his domain.

Leaving the tunnel, he stepped back into the throne room and paced up and down in excitement. In no time at all, Khasim would return and present him with the talisman he prized above all else in the world. His power would then be supreme indeed, his ability to wage war on all that was good and virtuous vastly enlarged. He would be omnipotent and invincible.

'Hurry, Khasim! What is keeping you?' he called.

Then he walked across to his throne and mounted it grandly. He would sit in state until his servant brought him the Rose of Elil.

R 1

'We dare not try again. It will mean certain death.'

Old Asaf, as usual, was trying to pour cold water on the idea of an armed rebellion against the caliph.

'If it comes to that, let us die!' retorted Mahmoud. He took the arm of the old man. 'Freedom is the only thing worth dying for, Asaf.'

The two men began to trade arguments again and Abu had to bring the calming effect of his reason to the discussion.

'Better a living camel than a dead tiger,' he opined.

'Well said, Abu!' agreed Asaf.

'Tigers have some pride at least!' asserted Mahmoud with feeling. 'Would you rather be camels who are beaten by your master?'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'No!' shouted someone, winning a cheer from his friends.

'Tigers are free – do you want to stay as beasts of burden?'

Mahmoud's challenge stirred up a flurry of comment and Abu had a job to control it. In the excitement of the debate, none of the rebels noticed the face that was peering at them through a tiny window in the corner of the shop, a face that was upside down because it belonged to Achmed and he was only able to eavesdrop by hanging over the side of the roof of the shop. Two of the Mauve Gang, holding a leg apiece for him, wondered what was happening.

'Sh!' cautioned Achmed. 'This is important.'

Abu put his point once again, suggesting that they bide their time until they could consolidate their strength.

'You said that before, Abu,' reminded Mahmoud.

'And look what happened!' said another rebel.

'Bahloul and his men raided the city and caught us napping,' added a third.

'Don't I know it, friend!' sighed Abu. 'They stole my best carpet.'

'But they didn't find the store of weapons!' yelled Mahmoud. 'I say – use them!'

'Use them! Use them! Use them!' the cry went up.

'It would be madness,' came the familiar wail.

'Let's get them out now!' decided Mahmoud and he opened the door to the storeroom at the rear of the shop. 'What's this?'

Seated on a carpet in the half-dark were a man, a boy and a Capuchin monkey. The rebels thought they could have only one reason for being there.

'Spies!'

'Informers!'

'Kill them!'

'Cut their throats!'

A dozen men rushed into the storeroom with vengeance in their minds and grabbed the weapons that were concealed there. They would certainly have used those

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

weapons if Hasan's voice had not rung out with unmistakable authority.

'Is the Champion of the Rose your enemy?'

He held the magic Flower of Mercy up and its glow became more and more intense. Old Asaf recognised it at once.

'The Rose of Elil . . . it's the Rose of Elil!'

'Allah be praised!' cried Abu. 'We have found a leader!'

'A leader! A leader!' chanted the rebels, overjoyed.

And they kneeled before Hasan to await his command, old Asaf for once not saying that it was madness. Shakti was rather frightened by all the commotion and stayed in his pouch. Majeed's reactions ranged from fear through puzzlement and amusement to sheer enjoyment. Hasan, quite used to such homage, accepted it as to the manner born, with the bearing of a true prince.

All eyes were on the Rose of Elil, including those of the hanging Achmed, who was amazed to see the talisman. He had also been amazed to recognise Majeed, whom he had last encountered in an alleyway before the boy had performed his vanishing trick.

'What is all the noise about, Achmed?' asked one of the leg-holders.

'Be quiet, fool!'

'How much longer?' The other leg-holder was getting tired.

'Hold me tight, dolts!' hissed Achmed, and he continued to goggle through the window at the gathering inside the shop.

It was the young Mahmoud, speaking with eager respect, who asked for the name of their deliverer with the talisman.

'Who are you, master?'

'I am Hasan-al-Bukir, Prince of Baghdad . . . and a sworn enemy of Alquazar the sorcerer.'

There was a murmur of excited approval among the rebels.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Unaware of the situation among Abu's carpets, Alquazar thought only of his own. Where was Khasim? Inwardly, he chided his servant for being so slow; outwardly, he remained calm and inscrutable, the only sign of his mounting impatience being the steady tap of his finger on the arm of his throne. Whenever he heard the slightest sound, his eyes flicked towards the open window and to the clear night sky beyond. Where *was* Khasim?

Princess Zuleira had almost swooned with relief when Hasan had been brought back to life through the agency of the Flower of Mercy. It had indeed been merciful to her and she would sing its blessings for ever. She had watched developments in the Garden of Elil up to the point when her betrothed had put his hands upon the Rose along with those of Majeed. Something had then occurred in the cavern which had distracted her attention completely.

'Oh!'

She had heard the crackle of flame and had wheeled around to see smoke and fire rising from the shaft. The soul-image had made another appearance on the screen to confirm her fear.

'It is the cauldron of Alquazar . . .'

'But that is far below,' she had exclaimed.

'Not any more. The caliph has aroused its fury. Its flames are as high as this mountain.'

Zuleira had run to the shaft and looked down. The inferno was eating its way upwards all the time. Soon it would be licking its lips inside the secret cavern itself. How could she escape? What was to stop her being burned alive?

After such a long time agonising about Hasan's survival, the Princess now found herself obsessed with the chances of her own. Alquazar had not only sealed off her one exit. He had sent his vengeful fire to consume her as a punishment.

The heady enthusiasm with which the rebels had greeted

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Hasan had now become an apologetic realism as the men confronted the stern practicalities of their situation.

'There are few of us, Lord Hasan,' noted Abu.

'Our weapons are primitive,' confessed Asaf, drawing a wooden club from its hiding place.

'We have neither armour nor horses,' continued Abu. 'But we do have you!'

Excited approval had now become a rather dour resignation among most of the rebels. Even with a leader, they felt, their task was almost impossible.

Majeed and Hasan were still sitting on the carpets and the men were gathered at their feet. The boy was having his first taste of what it must be like to be a prince holding court. He had even coaxed Shakti out to sit in a privileged position above the heads of the rebels of Jadur.

Higher above those same rebel heads, the two leg-holders were getting restive. It was one thing to perform their tricks before an audience for money and applause: it was quite another to spend such a long time on a cold night stuck up on the roof of a carpet shop, clinging on to Achmed's legs. They had no real idea of what was happening down below and their leader was only able to communicate with them by hissing like a cobra or twitching his none too fragrant feet.

'Achmed!'

'Shhh!'

'We are getting hungry.'

An anguished twitching of both feet told them to stop complaining and hang on tight. Achmed was apparently on to something.

'Alquazar will not be easily destroyed,' confessed Hasan, who had been inside the palace and had had a chance to assess the strength of the military at first hand. 'To start with, we are outnumbered.'

Mahmoud had heard enough cautious talk for one night. He got to his feet and pointed to the talisman.

'Who ever possesses the Rose need fear no evil!' He

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

turned to Hasan. 'Use the talisman to destroy the tyrant Alquazar!'

'Yes, yes!' said several voices.

'Our troubles are over,' decided another of the conspirators. 'We don't need weapons any more, friends.'

'This is the Sword of Freedom!' shouted Mahmoud, indicating the Rose again. 'This is the only weapon we need!'

The rebels were starting to let their enthusiasm get the better of them again. Like a good leader, Hasan brought them back to the basic facts of their situation.

'We may not use the Flower of Mercy as a weapon.'

Disappointment made the questions flow thick and fast.

'Why not, Lord Hasan?'

'Are you afraid to use it against Alquazar?'

'How can we defeat him otherwise?'

'Is not its power strong enough?'

'Do you have another plan?'

'According to legend . . .'

Hasan cut through all this with practised ease, his tone firm and his message unequivocal.

'The Rose of Elil is a symbol of truth, honour and mercy. It should never be used for violent ends or to spill blood.'

There was a long silence. All present acknowledged the truth of what had been said and their respect for the Rose made the men more defeatist. Unless they had the help of some special magic, the rebels knew that Alquazar held all the cards. Pessimists began to mutter again and old Asaf was coming perilously close to saying that any new attack would be madness when Hasan took control.

Leaping down from the carpet, he drew the sword of his father and held it over his head.

'Alquazar will be destroyed – at my own hand – by the sword!'

A cheer greeted this but it was only a half-hearted one. Most of the rebels were not looking at Hasan at all but were staring straight past him. Awe and disbelief

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

reigned in Abu's carpet shop and Majeed added his own yelp of surprise. For what they had all seen – or, in Majeed's case, actually felt – was a pile of carpets rising up a foot or so into the air. Evidently Hasan had brushed them with the talisman as he had pushed himself off them.

'The magic of the Rose has given these poor carpets life,' called out Majeed, laughing. '*They* are the chariots we need!'

The idea was immediately taken up by the rebels and a whole host of wild suggestions were made. Achmed, still dangling at the window throughout all this, decided he could stay no longer. A twitch of his feet had him hauled up gratefully by the leg-holders and he set off with his news to the palace.

'We could attack Alquazar from the air . . .'

'. . . hurl down boulders on him . . .'

'. . . or boiling oil . . .'

'. . . or some form of fire . . .'

'. . . or camel dung . . .'

Hasan called a halt to all this sort of talk. He made the men sit down again and then took up his position with their three leaders – Abu, Asaf and the young Mahmoud. It was important to remind the rebels of the chain of command and the fact that he was its chief link.

'Now – we must have a plan. I think it should be this . . .'

Many flying carpets had brought joy to the rebels of Jadur, but the sight of one was enough to raise Alquazar's spirits. He was still seated on his throne when he saw the speck in the sky that grew to reveal itself as Khasim. The magic carpet sailed in through the window and circled the room before coming to rest in front of the caliph.

Alquazar stood up, regal and commanding, but the quivering Khasim stayed huddled up on the carpet, hiding his face for shame and not daring to speak, let alone look up. Hand outstretched, Alquazar waited with growing annoyance for the gift of the talisman. It soon became clear that Khasim had nothing to give. Standing

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

right over him, the caliph spoke with a menacing whisper.

'Give . . . me . . . the Rose.'

Khasim looked up, choking with fear, then cringed back. He held up his hands in a gesture of abject failure, then sank down again to await the inevitable.

'So . . . !'

The outstretched palm of Alquazar now closed and his hand became a tight, white-knuckled fist. Fury made his voice crackle like fire and everyone in the room feared for Khasim's life as the caliph's tirade mounted towards its crescendo.

'I saw it, Khasim, there in your grasp – and yet you return to me empty-handed!' He walked round and round the grovelling informer. You incompetent insect! You slave's offal! You brainless clod! Because of you, I have lost a prize beyond all others, a prize beyond the dreams of Solomon!'

Bahloul had entered the throne room with Achmed on urgent business but neither man dared interrupt the sorcerer in full flow. They both stepped back as Alquazar circled the room like a great vulture about to swoop down on carrion.

Everyone was on his knees now but no one was bending lower than the luckless Khasim, who was trying to crawl into the floor with the shame and humiliation of it all.

'You called yourself my loyal servant . . . ready to undertake anything to please your master!' Sarcasm became abuse. 'You scum, you streak of spittle, you diseased entrails of a worm!' He jabbed a finger of doom at the cowering wretch. '*This* is your reward . . .'

'No, no, master!' wailed Khasim.

'Silence!'

'I did my best, O Magnificent One!' Khasim was only too aware of what happened to those who displeased Alquazar. 'My very best . . .'

'You must be paid for your service!' sneered the caliph.

'*Please* . . .'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'Let all who would fail me note this well!'

He aimed his index finger at Khasim, its diamond ring a symbol of the majesty that had been flouted, its curling nail a fearsome claw that seemed to be charged with a throbbing power.

'This is how I treat failure . . .'

'Caliph – I beg you, have—'

Khasim's last word was a mere croak. On the carpet where a human being had been squatting in disgrace, a fat toad now sat and croaked its bewilderment all around the throne room. Alquazar bent down and picked up the toad and looked at it closely before placing it with great ceremony on the throne itself.

He stepped back and appraised it with a sadistic smile. Bahloul wondered if it was the right moment to disturb his master.

The hushed silence in the throne room was in sharp contrast to the noise that was now filling the secret cavern as the flames really began to take a hold. Zuleira was forced further and further into the secret domain, until she found herself backing towards a gap in the rock. She went through out of curiosity and found herself atop the lone crag from which her step-father had directed his tornado on to the city below. It made her dizzy to look down.

'Hasan,' she gasped, instinctively, 'help! Wherever you are . . . please . . . help!'

Turning away from the rock, Zuleira went back into the cavern, where the acrid smoke was now swirling in clouds and the huge stone heads that flanked the entrance to the shaft seemed to be breathing fire. Their malevolent glare reminded her of Alquazar.

'Hasan . . . help me! Please, please . . . save me!'

But there was no sign of her prince. The only response which she got to her cry was an intensified roar from the flames as they made their way closer and closer. How much longer could she hold out?

Satisfied with his vengeance against Khasim, the sor-

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

cerer swung round to see Bahloul standing there. The guard commander did not dare to speak until addressed. His master was in a mood to reduce the entire court to reptiles.

'Well, Bahloul?' snapped Alquazar.

'News, master.'

'Be brief!'

'It is Achmed, Lord Caliph . . .'

'Who?' Alquazar stared down at Achmed who was trembling on his knees. 'What does the toad want?'

Mention of toads made the leader of the Mauve Gang quail. He had seen the sturdy figure of the pompous Khasim transformed into an ugly, croaking toad. What might the sorcery of the vindictive caliph do to Achmed himself?

'He has seen the Prince Hasan, master,' explained Bahloul.

'Never!' exploded Alquazar.

'Achmed claims that he has, Lord Caliph.'

'Hasan was destroyed – at my command!'

'He lives,' insisted Bahloul. 'And he has the Rose.'

Alquazar was incensed and an apologetic croak from the toad did nothing to mollify him. Malice turned his swarthy face black and he towered above the cringing Achmed.

'Speak, vermin!'

'He's with the rebels now, master.'

'If you are lying to me . . .'

'No, no, Lord Alquazar,' gibbered the spy. 'I saw them – I heard them – I brought the news at once.'

Because of the fear that he instilled into them, the spies of Alquazar were usually reliable, if distasteful, characters. Achmed, quite clearly, would never dare to mislead his master.

'Deal with them, Bahloul!'

'Yes, Lord Caliph.'

'Destroy them all – spare no one.'

The commission brought a smile to Bahloul's lips. He would take pleasure in killing Hasan himself. Achmed introduced a snag.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'He already has the magic of the Rose, master. I saw . . .

'Well, what did you see, slug?'

'I saw the Rose of Elil make carpets float in the air . . .'

Achmed was bringing valuable information to Alquazar and could not understand why he was being treated with such contempt. He had taken great risks to spy on the carpet shop. His throat went dry as the caliph picked up the toad from the throne and caressed it with his curling fingernail.

'This slimy toad was once your master . . . perhaps you should join him, Achmed.'

The acrobat flung himself in front of Alquazar and grovelled.

'Lord of Jadur, we serve only you! Put us to the test!'

'A chance to redeem your past stupidity?' asked Alquazar, enjoying the man's desperation.

'Please, O Mighty One . . .'

'Very well. Bring your gang of misbegotten apes to me.'

Achmed began to bow and grin and thank him profusely but he was not allowed to do so for long. Alquazar's order cracked like a whip.

'At once!'

After Achmed had scurried out, the caliph turned to Bahloul. The guard commander despised all of the informers. He felt that he could keep the city under subjection without their help. He was glad that his master now had reason to let him meet Hasan again. It would be a grim reunion for the prince of Baghdad.

'So!' sneered Alquazar, 'the rebels still intend to attack us, do they? We shall be ready for them . . .'

He clapped his hands and dozens of slaves ran about their business. Alquazar was going to crush the revolt in the most savage manner possible. Khasim had been lucky to be turned into a toad. A far worse fate would befall the citizens of Jadur.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Chapter Thirteen

The carpet shop was a hive of activity as plans were made, orders given and weapons distributed. Spirits were buoyant and morale was high. Even old Asaf was looking forward to the attack. Two things had changed the motley crew of half-hearted rebels into men of iron determination and common purpose. One was the arrival of a leader in the person of the dashing Hasan; the other was the blessing of the Rose of Elil. The dissidents now had their own kind of magic with which to combat that of Alquazar the sorcerer.

'You, Mahmoud, will bring your men this way . . .'

'Yes, Lord Hasan.'

'And you, Raschid, must approach the palace by this route . . .'

'Yes, master . . .'

Hasan had planned everything in meticulous detail and the men were enthused by his obvious experience as a soldier and tactician. Having been inside every part of the palace, Hasan was able to draw a rough diagram of its layout. This was a tremendous help to the rebels. The only part of the palace which any of the citizens of Jadur had ever seen was the dungeons. Abu was reminded of someone.

'It is a pity that *he* is not here to share in our rebellion.'

'Who?' asked Hasan.

'Wazir-al-Wuzara. Once the headman of the city . . .'

'I have met him.'

'He is still alive, then?' said Abu, eagerly.

The news sent another ripple of confidence through the ranks. Wazir was a loved and respected man who had been feared dead.

'We shall release him and all the other prisoners,' announced Hasan. 'Freedom for all the citizens of Jadur!'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'Freedom!' went up the chant.

Majeed listened to all this with great interest. He now understood why the city had been so subdued and unfriendly when he had first walked into it. Among the rebels he was pleased to see the water-carrier who had once taken pity on him and given him a drink. The man winked at him in friendship. They were on the same side now.

'Sit here with me, Majeed,' instructed Hasan.

'Yes, master.' He stepped on to the carpet that was hovering in the middle of the room and squatted down cross-legged behind Hasan. 'Come, Shakti . . .'

After the experience in the storm, the monkey had grave doubts about flying carpets but he did not want to be parted from Majeed again. He somersaulted on to the carpet and then snuggled up in his pouch.

Hasan drew his sword and kissed its blade for good luck. In his turban the Rose of Elil shone like a beacon in the darkness. It gave fresh heart to Abu and Mahmoud and the others, who were now climbing on to floating carpets.

'You all know what to do?' checked Hasan.

'Yes, master!' The shout was unanimous.

'To the palace and victory!' yelled the prince.

'Death to Alquazar!' cried Mahmoud.

And the magic carpets rose together and sailed out of the shop.

A carpet of a very different kind was alarming Princess Zuleira. Flame was now covering whole areas of the floor in the secret cavern and it was spreading all the time with malignant glee. She tried to take refuge on the stone platform before the Mirror of the Moon, perhaps hoping to summon up the soul-image and implore his help. But her path was cut off by a stream of fire that suddenly sizzled across in front of her.

Zuleira let out a scream and jumped back before the flames could touch the trailing silk of her cloak. The smoke was catching in her throat now and the volcanic heat of the blaze brought beads of perspiration to her

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

face and body. To get some relief from this heat she flung off her cloak and it landed on the rock floor of the cavern. Almost at once it burst into flame and became part of the inferno that was threatening her more and more as each second passed.

'Hasan!' she cried in her panic. 'I need you, Hasan!'

She backed away still further and realised with a shudder what was happening. This was no random blaze. The fire had purpose and direction. She was being driven systematically towards the opening that led to the lone crag, there to be forced off it into a grotesque death fall.

The princess ran out to this crag again and stared down in horror. The city seemed a mile below and she would be pulp by the time she had smashed into it. Then something distracted her for a moment from her own personal crisis. Jadur was a mass of lights and a murmur of many distant voices rose from its streets. What had happened to the curfew? It usually kept the city dark and silent.

She noticed something else. By the light of the pale moon, she could just make out tiny figures wending their way up towards the palace, an army of ants that were converging with speed. And what were those strange coloured objects that flashed across the night sky? It was all too mystifying.

Alquazar, however, was in no way mystified. Anticipating the attack from the air and on foot, he was taking steps to counter it. Before him in the throne room kneeled Achmed and the Mauve Gang, shambling creatures who were highly uncomfortable in the presence of their caliph.

'We shall meet magic with magic,' he told them.

A number of carpets had been unrolled and laid out on the floor in formation. Alquazar gave the word and the members of the gang moved uneasily to take up their positions. Some of Bahloul's soldiers occupied the remaining carpets. Achmed tried a meek protest.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'We would willingly fight for you in the streets, master.'

'Sit down, scum!' Bahloul's shove left him no option.

Like their leader, the Mauve Gang were terrified at the prospect of entrusting their lives to flying carpets. Alquazar disposed of their mute opposition with ease.

'If any of you would rather stay here . . .'

His eyes went to the toad which was sitting on the throne and which gave a loud croak. Achmed and his men needed no more convincing.

'We are ready to do your service, Lord Caliph.'

'Good. It will be your privilege to lead my men into battle.'

Bahloul smirked at all this. He loathed the Mauve Gang and was relishing their fear and discomfort. Sarcasm curled his lip.

'Be brave, friends,' he advised.

Achmed cursed the man under his breath, then clung to the carpet as hard as he could when it began to ripple and float.

'Away!'

Alquazar's hand sent them all flying through the window in strict order. The gasps of alarm from the Mauve Gang were soon no more than whistles in the wind.

'Bahloul!'

'Lord Caliph?' saluted the guard commander.

'Place your men well – at once!'

Bahloul nodded and marched out of the throne room with his usual briskness. In no time at all he was in the courtyard addressing the massed ranks of his soldiers.

'You all know what to do. Wait for the signal then strike to kill.' His voice dropped to a growl. 'We take no prisoners. Is that understood?'

The soldiers understood only too well. Their commander had a thirst for blood that had made him notorious.

'Out of sight – all of you! I don't want to see a hair of your heads! Hurry!'

The men scattered and found hiding places around

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

the courtyard. Some dipped their pikes ready for a charge, others relied on their gleaming swords, but all were supremely confident of success. What possible chance did a horde of disorganised rebels stand against trained soldiers with superior arms?

'Archers!'

Bahloul's shout brought a few dozen men out of their places on the battlements. Satisfied that he had deployed them properly, Bahloul waved them back and they fitted their first arrows to their small but powerful bows. Anyone rushing into the courtyard could now be surprised from below and from above.

Only when he was certain that the ambush had been set did Bahloul go back into the palace. Alquazar was waiting for him in the throne room and glanced up at his approach.

'The trap is set, master.'

'Excellent.' He thought about Zuleira, hemmed in by the wall of flame in his secret cavern. 'And the bait is ready . . .'

The toad was still on the throne and it croaked in defiance as Bahloul came near. He put a hand to his sword, ready to slice it in two, given the opportunity.

'I will take that, Bahloul,' ordered Alquazar.

'My sword?'

'I will need it,' smiled the other, taking the weapon and testing the keenness of its blade with his thumb. 'I intend to deal with Prince Hasan – personally.'

Bahloul was disappointed that he himself would not be able to dispose of his enemy but he had the consolation of knowing that his own sword would perform the service. Hasan was already a dead man.

Showing every sign of life, Hasan knelt on the flying carpet as it moved over the rooftops. He had a lot of scores to settle with the dreaded caliph and could not wait for the confrontation.

'Down there, master,' pointed Majeed.

'What's that?'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'Mahmoud and the others. Climbing the hill to the palace.'

Hasan looked down to see the young rebel leader and his followers. There was no shortage of courage among the citizens now and Hasan resolved that that courage would be rewarded with freedom from the yoke of a tyrant.

'Be bold, Mahmoud!' he whispered.

As if hearing him, Mahmoud passed on the message to his men.

'It is now or never, friends!' he announced.

'And if they drive us back?' asked the one waverer.

'Impossible. While we have the Rose of Elil, the caliph can never defeat us.'

Armoured by this thought, they scrambled on up the hill with renewed determination. Other groups were already closer to the massive gates of the palace. Old Asaf himself was puffing in that direction, too, anxious to be on hand to lend his puny strength to a cause that no longer seemed like an act of madness.

'Look up!' panted Asaf, pausing for breath and leaning against a wall for support. 'Look up at the prince!'

His men obeyed and they saw what had caught his eye. Silhouetted against the bland smile of the moon, the carpet bearing Hasan was directly above them. While Hasan himself could only be made out in dim outline, something else was shining in his turban like a miniature star that guided the way.

'The Rose of Elil!' exclaimed one man, inspired by the sight.

'Follow it!' urged Asaf, moving off again. 'Follow the Flower of Mercy . . . and set Jadur free!'

Dizziness had made Zuleira avert her eyes from the city below and she staggered back inside the cavern. Only a small area of this was now unclaimed by fire and there was no means of checking the blaze. When she tried to jump forward to stamp out some of the smaller flames, she was thrown back by the solid wall of heat. Zuleira

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

had trespassed and she was now paying the full penalty. Panic had given way to a tearful resignation. What hurt her most was the thought that she would die before seeing her beloved Hasan again.

Her beloved Hasan was being seen by someone else at that moment. Achmed, adjusting to life on a flying carpet, was almost enjoying the experience and he was delighted when he spotted Hasan and Majeed far below him.

'This way,' he called to his men on the other carpets. 'There he is – down there!'

The members of the Mauve Gang banked their respective carpets and followed Achmed's example by swooping downwards. It was Majeed who raised the alarm. What had been six dots in the sky now became half a dozen threats to their continuance in the air.

'Hasan, look – they're going to attack us!'

'Take heart, Majeed – and hold on!'

Hasan guided his carpet down so that it was floating along one of the main thoroughfares of the city. Above him, some of the enemy carpets peeled off to make their strike. Achmed was anxious to draw the first blood and to ingratiate himself with Alquazar. Seeing the direction in which Hasan was heading, he brought his own carpet down into a street that was immediately adjacent. He and Hasan were now speeding in the same direction and would meet at the corner. As they approached the junction, Achmed was on his feet, waving his sword with an evil leer.

'We've got them now . . . we've got them!'

Reaching the corner first, Hasan turned to find himself right in the path of the oncoming Achmed. A split-second decision enabled him to shoot upwards and over the other carpet, sending Achmed and his companion rolling on to their backs. No sooner had the villains got to their feet again than other rebel carpets repeated the manoeuvre and the bewildered acrobats were downed yet again.

Abu, on one of these rebel carpets, smiled broadly.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

It was good to get his own back on Achmed, who had played so many jokes on others in the market place of Jadur.

'More of them, Hasan!' warned Majeed, as two more enemy carpets descended out of the sky. 'What can we do?'

'You watch!'

Hasan seemed to have complete control over his carpet and he evaded the two attackers without any difficulty. When they gave chase, he led them on a tortuous journey up and down alleyways, in and out of streets, round and about small squares. When he wanted to shake off his pursuers altogether, he simply made a sharp turn behind the cover of a minaret and lurked there until the others had shot past.

'That was fun, master!' laughed Majeed.

'It's no game,' reminded Hasan. 'We have work to do.'

Their pursuers had now split up to look for them. One of the carpets bore Aziz, a bearded ruffian who juggled knives in the market place. Aziz was delighted to round a corner and see Abu sailing towards him on his own carpet.

'Come here, Abu!' he chuckled, taking out a sheaf of knives.

'No, thanks!' said the carpet seller, deciding that discretion was the better part of valour. 'You'll have to catch us!'

To avoid the oncoming Aziz, he swung his carpet through the window of a building and found himself knocking over two of the people inside, as well as a fair amount of furniture. Leaving great damage and yells of rage in their wake, Abu and his companion flew on out of the window on the other side of the house, only to collide with yet another carpet manned by members of the Mauve Gang.

Rebels and acrobats collapsed through the awning of a fruit shop and a fierce struggle started. After much effort, the rebels got the better of their adversaries and climbed back on to their carpet.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'Wait!' said Abu, noticing the fruit that had been scattered all over the place. 'Ammunition!'

'Let's load those baskets and take them with us.'

While the two men were stocking up with missiles, Hasan and Majeed encountered more trouble from Achmed. The leader of the Mauve Gang veered round to give chase above the rooftops of the city.

'They won't get away *this* time!' he promised.

'Faster, Hasan!' yelled Majeed, when he saw that they were slowly being overhauled. 'Make it go faster.'

But Hasan was unable to increase the speed of his carpet. Achmed, beating his own mode of transport with his sword as if urging on a tired camel, was gaining all the time. At length the pursuer drew alongside the pursued and a swordfight developed, all the more deadly because it took place at such a height. Hasan matched skill against brute strength and was just getting the upper hand when he slipped and fell over the edge of the carpet.

'Hang on, Hasan!' cried Majeed, terror-stricken.

'Help me, Majeed,' called the prince, clinging to the edge of the carpet as it wheeled around the sky.

But Majeed's little muscles had no power to lift his master to safety and he had to content himself with words of comfort to the prince. Achmed's carpet zoomed in close and he hacked at the dangling man with his blade. Fortunately, he never got close enough to make contact or, indeed, to be able to leap on to Hasan's carpet.

'Hasan is in trouble!' observed Abu.

'We must save him!' urged his companion.

With their carpet fully loaded with baskets of fruit, the rebels took to the skies. They arrived in the nick of time because Achmed had managed to bring his carpet alongside that of Hasan in such a way that he could leap across. He was about to spring into the air when something hit him on the back of the neck.

'Aw! A peach!'

'Throw harder, Abu.' It was Majeed, delighted at the perfect aim.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Fruit of all kinds now rained down on Achmed and his colleague and both provided large, if noisy, targets. Achmed was hit so hard and so often that he began to complain.

'Fight fair! You must fight fair!'

A soggy peach caught him full in the face and he called a retreat at once. As he spun away, he lost control of his carpet and it came down in a vicious spiral before crashing into an awning outside the barber's shop. Knocked unconscious, the two men took no further interest in the proceedings.

Once he had been freed from the attentions of Achmed, Hasan was able to pull himself back up on to the carpet. He waved his thanks to Abu and then pointed down to where another rebel carpet was in difficulties.

'You help them. We'll go on to the palace!'

'Right,' acknowledged Abu.

Two more members of the Mauve Gang were soon being pelted with fruit and they crashed headlong into the wall of a house. Having rescued a second friend in need, Abu could now think about heading towards the palace himself. He had saved one especially large and soggy peach for Alquazar.

Alquazar was not waiting around to receive the gift. Having assured himself that Bahloul had matters in hand, he cleared his throne room, took a last sneering look at the toad and then hurried over to the secret door.

'Open in the name of Alquazar . . .'

It swung open and a red furnace glow greeted him. Striding down the tunnel, he reached the pool and stood among the flames that were dancing with such frenzy there. They had done their work admirably but he did not want them to get out of control.

'Far enough!' he commanded.

Immediately there was a slight easing of the intensity of the blaze, though the fire still climbed all the way up the connecting shaft. Alquazar was content.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'We do not want to destroy the Princess. We need her as live bait in the trap.' He took out Bahloul's sword and tried a few practice swipes. Then he looked upwards. 'Suffer, Zuleira . . . your pain will bring my victim straight into the trap . . .'

Zuleira did not need any advice about suffering. The fears and agonies of the last hour had channelled her brow with lines of despair. Her eyes were streaming, her throat sore from the smoke and her clothes blackened by the fumes. The fire had stopped advancing but it had now effectively sealed off the entrance to the cavern itself. She was stranded on the lone crag, a tiny white blob against the comprehensive blackness of the mountain.

Faint, desperate, unsteady on her feet, she was not sure how long she could hold her purchase on the rock. One slip and she would drop through the air like a stone. The very thought made her mind go muzzy. The fire had forced her out on to the crag and it was now watching with sadistic pleasure to see her falter.

Hasan had no inkling of Zuleira's plight as he directed his carpet up towards the palace of Jadur. His one thought was to get to Alquazar and to slay the tyrant. This would free the city, the people and the caliph's beautiful step-daughter.

The carpet circled the royal palace whose domes, minarets, pools and walled gardens looked breathtaking by moonlight. Majeed thought how different it all was from the poor and rather grubby city below. Then his quick eyes noticed a new danger.

'Soldiers, master!'

'Where?'

'Up there – waiting for us. They must have known we were coming.'

A carpet bearing two hefty soldiers was starting to descend towards them. Hasan did not stay to provide a welcome. He made his own carpet dip down until it flew into the courtyard, causing a flurry of commer

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

and surprise among the guards crouched in hiding there. Bahloul raced out to try and jab at the carpet with a borrowed pike but he missed it completely. Hasan and Majeed, with Shakti tucked up in his pouch, flew straight through the main doors of the palace and down a long passageway.

Guards came rushing at them but were knocked over. When they picked themselves up, the same guards were knocked over again by the carpet that was in pursuit. Hasan turned into the great moated corridor now and skimmed over the serene waters. More guards who came out to challenge them found themselves tipped off the narrow pathway with a splash.

When his carpet reached the main lobby, Hasan was spotted by the giant Nubian guards. The doors to the throne room were open and the men hurried to close them, the gap narrowing with each second.

'Think thin, Majeed!' advised Hasan.

'Very thin, master!'

Their carpet squeezed through the gap without an inch to spare and the doors thudded shut behind them. A distant bang and yell told the friends that the soldiers on their tail had come to grief outside.

'They did not think thin enough, master,' grinned Majeed.

Hasan, too absorbed with looking around in search of Alquazar, did not hear this remark. Guards rushed at him with swords but the carpet flew above their heads and out of reach.

'Where is the coward Alquazar?' demanded Hasan.

But the only answer came from an ugly toad that was sitting on the throne. It croaked repeatedly as if trying to convey a message, but Hasan could not interpret it.

'We must look elsewhere, Majeed,' he said.

And the carpet flew out through the window as more guards came racing in to try and hack him down.

'Down in the courtyard,' indicated Majeed, who had now appointed himself as look-out. 'Mahmoud and the others . . .'

The young rebel leader had waited a long time for

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

this taste of action and he had resolved that he would not be found wanting. Having gathered all the citizens together outside the gates, however, he had been a little disconcerted to find them open and unattended. It was most odd for the battlements not to be patrolled by Bahloul's men.

'Let's go in – but be careful,' warned Mahmoud.

They now crept into the courtyard, amazed that there was no opposition and making the mistake of relaxing and joking about it. They did not see two soldiers sneak out of the shadows and shut the gates behind them but Bahloul's barked command explained everything.

'Attack!'

Soldiers appeared from everywhere and caught the rebels off-guard. The latter began to panic at the sight of Bahloul's men but Mahmoud rallied them with his cry.

'They have tricked us – but we will show them how brave men can die! Freedom!'

'Freedom!' responded his men, and joined battle.

Mahmoud and the rebels were enveloped by the soldiers and Hasan's first impulse was to go to their aid. It was Majeed, scanning the skies for more attackers, who spotted someone whose need was far greater than that of the rebels.

'Master – the Princess!'

'Zuleira! Where?'

He stared up at the mountain and saw the frail figure perched on the crag. Even from that distance she looked forlorn, exhausted and doomed to fall any minute.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Chapter Fourteen

Fighting in the courtyard was fierce and sustained, with the two sides fairly evenly matched. The soldiers were professionals, schooled by their commander in the arts of brutality, and they had the initial advantage of surprise. This was nullified by the fact that the rebels were striving for an ideal – freedom – and once they had been reminded of this by Mahmoud, they fought with daredevil commitment. While the soldiers might have superior discipline and weapons, they had nothing like the indomitable spirit of the rebels.

'We fight for our city – we fight for our freedom!'

Mahmoud's call brought increased effort from his men and his leadership was proving a critical factor. His sword had already seen off two of the soldiers and he was now keeping three more at bay with a home-made lance. When a rebel fell to the ground, his place was quickly taken by another of like ferocity: when a soldier fell, his weapons were hastily removed by one of his opponents.

'Archers at the ready!' ordered Bahloul.

He had expected his men to have quelled the revolt by now and was disturbed that they had not. Arrows would make all the difference, however. He signalled to one of his men to pick out Mahmoud in the first flight. The archers drew their bows and took aim but the density of the fighting made their task difficult. Bahloul waited until the combatants were more spread out over the courtyard and then raised his arm in readiness.

Before he could send off the first lethal flight of arrows, a pomegranate struck him. The archers themselves were then assailed by fruit that was being hurled from a flying carpet by Abu and his companion. Concentration was lost; bows were dropped; one man was forced to the edge of the parapet by a torrent of

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

dates and then fell into the courtyard. He landed on two of his colleagues who had managed to corner Mahmoud. All three soldiers thudded to the ground and stayed there. Mahmoud picked up the sword of one of these casualties.

'Fight on, people of Jadur! We are winning!'

'Freedom!' yelled Abu, still hurling fruit.

'Open the gates! yelled Mahmoud.

Two rebels ran to do this and reinforcements rushed into the courtyard. The advantage was now definitely tilting towards the citizens of Jadur and Bahloul knew it. Leaping off the steps, he was soon in the heart of the fray himself, hoping that his example would spur his men on to victory.

At the same time as the two sides fought it out in the courtyard, another aerial battle was taking place. The sight of Zuleira standing at the top of the colossal mountain had sent Hasan flying up towards her as fast as the carpet would take him. From behind a cloud, however, two more carpets appeared with soldiers on them. Having lost his sword in the struggle with Achmed, Hasan was now quite defenceless and his only hope of escape was by using his control of the flight of the carpet.

'They all have big swords, master!' complained Majeed, as the two carpets dived down from the heavens.

'Get ready to catch, Majeed.'

Hasan sent his carpet off so that the others would follow and then he suddenly stalled and jerked upwards. One of the following carpets was now directly overhead and he was able to tip it over and put two more soldiers out of commission. As their weapons dropped from the sky, the nimble Majeed stretched out and caught a sword.

'Give it to me, Majeed.'

'No, you must guide the carpet,' decided the boy.

'But you are no match for two soldiers . . .'

Hasan's remark was a cue for the second carpet to

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

launch its attack. Rising back up into the sky, this carpet turned, lined up its angle of descent and then came swishing back through the air with a vengeance. Two of Bahloul's men stood on the carpet and either of them would have dwarfed Majeed, yet he held his sword aloft in defiance. The oncoming carpet dipped down and the soldiers got ready to cut Majeed and Hasan to shreds.

'Help!'

'In the name of Allah – save us!'

In the event, it was Majeed who won the day. Ducking as the enemy carpet passed overhead, he thrust the sword up so that it cut the material in two and rendered its magic useless. Gripping a side apiece of the useless carpet, the two soldiers went hurtling downwards.

Hasan could now get on with his rescue operation and he took his carpet soaring up to the crag, where the exhausted Zuleira was almost ready to collapse with fatigue.

'Hasan!' The sight of him revived her at once.

'I said I would return, my love,' he smiled, taking her in his arms.

He had stepped on to the crag now and the flames subsided at once inside the cavern, beaten back by the power of the Rose of Elil. Majeed fondled Shakti and kept discreetly in the background and the two lovers embraced and enjoyed their reunion.

'I was so afraid, Hasan,' she confessed.

'Nothing can harm us now, Zuleira.' He took the Rose from his turban and showed it to her. 'This is the Flower of Mercy.'

Its beauty and fragrance made such a deep impression on her that she forgot all about her ordeal and regarded the Rose in silent admiration. Like a true champion, Hasan knelt and offered the magic flower to his Princess.

'I bring you this talisman of mercy . . . and my love.'

'Thank you, Hasan . . .'

But before she could accept the gift, a claw-like, jewelled hand reached out and grabbed the Rose. The startled Zuleira screamed and Hasan took her protectively in his arms. Alquazar, gloating over the prize that

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

was at last his, stood in the entrance to the cavern. He had been lurking there and seized his moment perfectly.

'Keep your love, Hasan. I will have the Rose!' he sneered.

Hasan moved towards him but was kept back by the sharp point of the caliph's sword. Gazing upon the flawless Rose, the sorcerer inhaled its sweetness and thought of its magic powers.

'Now – I am master of the world! All that is good is at an end. One simple ritual and the Rose will for ever serve the cause of evil . . . at my command!'

He looked down into the courtyard, where the fighting was still at its hardest. Contempt and malice lay behind his next comment.

'Those scum down there are fighting for freedom . . . but I will set their souls in bondage for a thousand years!'

Mahmoud and his men were battling away like demons but they were now under considerable pressure. Bahloul's leadership had swung matters round in the soldiers' favour. They were slowly wearing down the opposition and defeating idealism with brute force. But Mahmoud, now very weary and bleeding from wounds, had no thought of giving in.

'To the dungeons!' he yelled.

'Crush them!' roared Bahloul. 'No mercy!'

Resisting the onslaught, Mahmoud and a few followers managed to hack their way towards the steps. They jumped over the bodies of slain guards and ran towards the door into the dungeons. Another guard blocked their way and they sent him groaning to the floor with sharp thrusts from their swords.

Mahmoud now led the rebels down the stairs into the dark, airless dungeons. Guards and gaolers who rushed at them were soon overpowered and keys taken from them. The men stretched out on the instruments of torture were released with care and showed a pathetic gratitude. Cells were opened and other friends were liberated. It was left to Mahmoud to open the last cell.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'Wazir! Then it's true . . . you are still alive.'

Hardly daring to believe it, Wazir-al-Wuzara fell to his ancient knees before his gallant rescuer.

'My son . . .'

'You are free,' said Mahmoud, helping him to his feet. 'We have come to set Jadur free from the tyrant. Nothing can stop us because we have the Rose of Elil and are led by Prince Hasan!'

Unknown to Mahmoud, the Rose was now in the grasp of Alquazar and the leadership of Hasan was of very little use. The prince was standing on the craggy ledge outside the cavern and could do no more than keep a protective arm around Zuleira. Alquazar now had them at his mercy and he knew it. Rose in one hand and sword in the other, he kept them on the precarious ledge and cackled in triumph.

'The universe will tremble at my slightest whisper. I shall possess all the treasures of the world; its kings will grovel at my feet and I will be denied nothing.' He looked at Zuleira and his desire glowed. 'Nothing!'

She met his gaze with defiance and disdain.

'You have not finished with me yet, Caliph of Darkness,' warned Hasan, taking a step towards him.

'You will be dealt with . . . and then she will be mine!'

The prospect made Zuleira feel sick to her stomach and it goaded Hasan into trying to leap at Alquazar. But the point of the sword made him keep his distance and he could do nothing but offer comfort to the weeping Zuleira.

Alquazar now spun round and strode off into the cavern to share his triumph with his soul-image. The face dutifully appeared in the Mirror of the Moon and it had a desperate hope in it.

'I have it, you fragment of lost humanity!' laughed Alquazar, holding up the Rose. 'It is mine!'

'You gave me your word, master. Release me!'

It was an agonised plea but it was competely wasted on the malevolent sorcerer.

'Set you free? Never!'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

His great laugh became a cry of rage as the Rose of Elil was suddenly snatched from his grasp by Majeed. The boy had stayed in a corner and had waited for the moment to pounce. Moving like quicksilver, he now darted out of the way of Alquazar's slashing sword.

'You cannot touch me with your evil!'

'I will feed your flesh to the dogs of Jadur! Give me the Rose!'

Hasan saw his opportunity to disarm the sorcerer and he rushed towards him but Alquazar was on his guard and stopped the prince with a gesture of his arm.

'Hasan!' exclaimed Zuleira.

He had been turned into stone, frozen on the spot like a living statue, grimacing with pain. Zuleira put her arms around him but she could do nothing to counter the spell.

'That will teach you to interfere with me!' snarled Alquazar.

'Do not hurt him!' threatened Majeed.

'I will deal with *you* first . . .'

Alquazar made a sudden dash at the boy but Majeed's nimble feet helped him to dodge the sorcerer. He was pursued all around the cavern until he was finally cornered in a high rock crevice. Alquazar started to clamber up towards him and he seemed doomed. Zuleira's cry for help was unable to deter the caliph. Alquazar was now only a few yards away from the boy and from his chance to take the Rose of Elil into his wicked grasp once more.

'Majeed! Majeed!'

A thin, silvery whisper made him stare across at the mirror where the soul-image was watching him.

'Majeed, Vahishta brought you to this place. In her name . . . trust me!'

'Be silent!' commanded Alquazar.

Majeed was in a state of total uncertainty. Could he trust the face in the mirror that looked so much like that of Alquazar?

'What must I do?' he asked.

'Only the talisman can release me . . . give it to *me*.'

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

There was a persuasive sincerity in the voice and Majeed knew what he had to do when Alquazar's terror made him shout out.

'Do that and you will destroy us all!'

'You are the father of lies,' said Majeed, and he threw the Rose straight at the mirror. 'There – take it!'

With a look of infinite hope, the soul-image held out its hand to receive the gift that would release it. The Rose hit the mirror and melted right into it. A tortured yell escaped Alquazar as he was immediately sucked into the heart of the crystalline mirror by some violent upsurge of power.

'No . . . my power can never die!' he shrieked.

In a moment of shimmering wonder, the two faces of Alquazar became one as he and his soul-image united. The picture disintegrated for a second, then re-formed to show one last serene portrait of a benign spirit at peace with the world. The sorcerer had been destroyed.

The smiling face vanished, to be replaced by the sight of the Rose of Elil, now back in its rightful place in the Garden. It shone with a bewitching radiance and then dissolved in a whirlpool of light. The Flower of Mercy had conquered the forces of evil and it had now returned to its source.

Khasim, too, had made a sudden return. At the very moment that Alquazar was sucked into the mirror, he had changed from a toad back into his own person, only to find himself crouching on the throne in a rather ridiculous posture. Shamefaced but relieved, he got down and looked around, wondering what had brought about his release from the spell.

Alquazar's death had meant the destruction of all his evil magic and Hasan had been set free from his petrified state. The prince now embraced Zuleira warmly and they were able to shrug off the horrors of what they had been through in the joy of each other's love. They followed Majeed out to the crag, then turned to kiss.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Tactfully ignoring this, the boy took Shakti out of his pouch so that he could enjoy the moment of victory. The monkey perched on his shoulder as Majeed cupped his hands to shout the message of deliverance.

'Alquazar is dead! Alquazar is dead!'

At first, nobody in the courtyard below seemed to hear and the fighting continued as fiercely as ever. But Majeed's reedy voice grew in volume and pitch as it drifted down and it soon echoed the length of the whole valley.

'Alquazar is dead! Alquazar is dead!'

Everyone heard it now and the effect was dramatic. The rebel citizens stopped fighting and cheered, while the soldiers discarded their weapons and joined in the celebrations. Only Bahloul wanted to struggle on but his exhortations to his men went unheard.

'Pick up your swords! Fight! Fight, you blockheads!'

When he himself tried to lash at some of the rebels, he was soon overpowered and found the sword of Mahmoud at his throat. The cheering became louder and louder now as women and children ran from their houses and sang with joy in the streets. Jadur had been rescued from the tyranny which had plagued it for so long.

'Give thanks to Allah – we are free!' yelled Mahmoud.

'Thanks to Allah!' went up the cry.

Abu pointed to the figures on the distant crag and reminded them of the man who had led the successful revolt and had brought the Rose of Elil to help them.

'Give thanks to Prince Hasan!'

The cheers were redoubled and people shouted themselves hoarse. Khasim had come out into the courtyard and now added his own booming laugh to the happy tumult of noise. It was so much better to be a free man under the rule of Prince Hasan than to be a croaking toad under the hateful Alquazar.

'Long live Prince Hasan!' Khasim bawled out.

And every soldier and citizen of Jadur took up the cry with enthusiasm, until both Hasan and Zuleira acknowledged it from the crag with a wave.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

'Long live Prince Hasan!'

The throne room was a place of light and splendour now, its brooding menace a thing of the past, its windows wide open to let in the sun. It was thronged with wedding guests in their finest attire and there was an air of joy and celebration such as had never been known in the days of Alquazar. Hospitality was lavish, servants quick and eager, music gay and lively.

Prince Hasan sat on the throne in regal magnificence. Beside him on another throne was Princess Zuleira, his bride, a vision of beauty in her wedding dress. All the trials and torments which they had been through seemed worth it now that they were at last married.

'Great Prince . . .'

The old man who now approached him had first met Hasan in the dungeons. In place of his prison rags, Wazir-al-Wuzara wore the robes of the Grand Vizier and he stood before his master with poise and dignity.

'I speak for all the people of Jadur. We pledge our hearts to serve you as free men.' He turned to face the court. 'The days of evil are over. Long live the Caliph Hasan!'

The cheers filled the room with sound and were picked up and reinforced by the shouts of people out in the courtyard.

'And long live Majeed!' grinned the boy.

Majeed was seated in a place of honour beside the new caliph and his lovely bride. Dressed in rich apparel and gaining respectful glances from all around him, the boy was now a person of importance and he relished this fact. Shakti, too, was delighted at the great improvement in their fortunes – they would never starve again. What pleased Majeed most, perhaps, was the fact that he now had his own servant to wait upon him – Khasim.

'Friends . . .'

Hasan got to his feet and a silence fell upon the room as everyone waited to hear what their ruler had to say.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

He glanced lovingly at the princess, then addressed the assembled guests.

'With Zuleira as my bride, I shall rule with justice and with compassion . . . for that is the path of Allah, the Most Great!'

His gracious speech was cheered to the echo and the courtiers surged forward to thank and congratulate him. Zuleira stood up and took his hand and then they strode together to the balcony overlooking the courtyard so that they could return the waves of joy from the crowd below.

Majeed went with them and it was he who pointed to the skies and produced his biggest smile yet.

'Look, master . . .'

High above the palace were the magic carpets that the rebels had used in their fight against the soldiers. Abu was sitting on the first one and Hasan could see Mahmoud, Akbar, even old Asaf on some of the others. The carpets now peeled off and flew past the balcony in celebration, their passengers saluting and honouring the caliph and his bride.

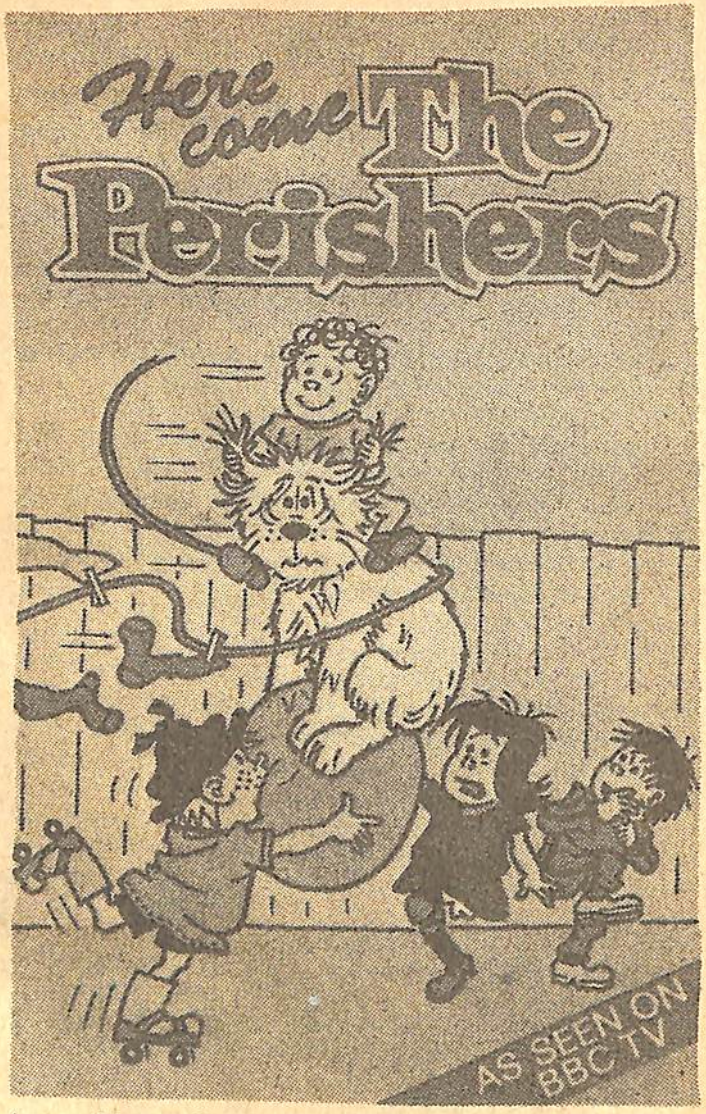
Laughter and applause greeted the sight and Hasan was both touched and amused. He and his bride had been welcomed with open arms and they could ask for no more. As the general excitement began to die away, something rekindled it at once and sent waves of good humour through the crowd.

Another carpet had appeared in the sky, sweeping around the huge dome of the palace and heading straight towards the balcony. It was piloted by Majeed, who had slipped away during the fly-past, and it had a small, brightly coloured sunshade on it.

Majeed gave his own salute, then brought his carpet right down so that Hasan and Zuleira could climb on to it. The loudest cheer of all was raised as the three of them began to float majestically into the warm air.

It was the most fitting way to celebrate their wedding. They were soon flying in triumph over the free city of Jadur.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri



An exciting collection of stories and cartoon drawings featuring those pesky Perishers adapted from the BBCTV series. Available now from your newsagents, price 65p.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Jokes, puzzles, crosswords, riddles, things to make, stories and a whole heap of fun. Puzzle your way through the pages with Wellington Boot and the other famous Perishers. Out now, price 65p.

CC-0. Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

Watch out for . . .

This is Roy's second sensational soccer quizbook that tests whether *you* know about football. Available in August 1979, so make sure that you buy a copy and see if you can beat your friends. Only 65p.

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri

CC-0 Kashmir Research Institute. Digitized by eGangotri